

THE PLO

CRITICAL APPRAISALS FROM THE INSIDE

EDITED BY
MOHSEN MOH'D SALEH
& NA'EEM JEENAH



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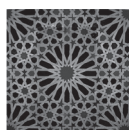
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Preface

While the Palestinian Liberation Organization is not a name that is heard with a great deal of interest these days – even among Palestinians – the organisation is still regarded as the ‘sole, legitimate representative of the Palestinian people’ by over a hundred states around the world, most of which host PLO embassies in their countries.

Much has been written about reviving the PLO’s glory days, and returning the organisation to its former position. But much has changed since the organisation first captured the Palestinian imagination, and the days when Palestinians waited for the PLO’s leaders, activists and soldiers to bring about their liberation are well and truly behind us.

Some argue that the PLO’s decline began with the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993 and 1995. Others suggest that the Accords were merely a symptom of the PLO’s decline, not the cause. Twenty years after the Accords were signed, numerous developments have rendered the PLO less and less relevant. Meanwhile, organisations outside the PLO have become more active and more prominent; two intifadas have taken place (and the PLO hardly featured in the second); the Palestinian National Authority, spawned by Oslo, has overtaken the PLO in many ways, and those involved in the Authority have helped to marginalise the PLO in the lives of Palestinians, and in Palestinian politics.

In fact, by the turn of the millennium, the PLO was already in a shambles. In 2005, a conference held in Cairo seemed to offer some hope that the organisation could be revitalised, but Hamas’s victory in the 2006 Palestinian Legislative Council elections caught the PLO off-guard. Conflicts and tensions erupted as the PLO tried to claw back the power it had lost.

Also in 2006, amid calls for the PLO to renew itself or make way for a new organisation, the Beirut-based Al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies and Consultations convened a conference at which representatives of the PLO’s main factions joined leaders from Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, as well as other activists and academics. The aim of the conference was for participants to discuss what they could learn from the past, and try to forge some consensus on how to take the Palestinian struggle forward. Al-Zaytouna Centre published the papers and discussions of that conference in Arabic. The publication of this English translation of those proceedings is a collaborative effort between Al-Zaytouna Centre and the Johannesburg-based Afro-Middle East Centre.

Although the conference took place some time ago, the Afro-Middle East Centre chose to publish the translation because the papers and debates provide a fascinating window on Palestinians' unique understandings of the history of their struggle, and of the PLO. Here you will find insiders' views on issues such as national unity, the intricate nature of relations between Palestinians in the diaspora and those in the Occupied Territory, the fragmentation of the Arab condition, as well as the impact of Arab and western meddling in Palestinian affairs. These views are not often published in English.

Since the conference, a myriad of new developments have occurred – including the political separation of the West Bank and Gaza, the creation of separate political authorities for each territory, and two savage wars launched by Israel against the Gaza Strip. In addition, security co-ordination between Israel and the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank has increased dramatically, stop-start negotiations have taken place between the Authority and Israel, and, in 2012, 'Palestine' was recognised as a non-member observer state by the United Nations. To reflect on how these developments have affected, and will continue to affect, the PLO, Mohsen Saleh, Al-Zaytouna's director and editor of the original Arabic edition, has written an introductory chapter for this edition.

Another major development in the Middle East and North Africa that will have long-term effects on the PLO, and the Palestinian story more generally, is the uprisings that broke out across the region at the end of 2010. With the self-immolation of vegetable vendor Muhammad Bouazizi in Tunisia, his country erupted in protests. The weeks thereafter saw similar demonstrations in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria. Syria descended into civil war, and, a little more than two years after Egypt's president, Hosni Mubarak, was overthrown, that country was subjected to a coup, which ousted the democratically elected president, suspended the constitution and dissolved the parliament. The Syrian war and the Egyptian coup have already had severe repercussions for Palestinian resistance groups.

This book is being published as Palestinian political groupings and civil society organisations grapple with what the uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East mean for them. Thus, a book evaluating the current malaise of the PLO and examining its future prospects is timely. For anyone interested in Palestine, and in national liberation struggles more broadly, this collection provides an anthology of key perspectives on the Palestinian struggle prior to 2006, and offers readers a rare

opportunity to eavesdrop on the conversations of those intimately involved in searching for solutions to the world's longest occupation and one of the world's most intractable conflicts.

In compiling the translation, much thought went into deciding whether to include the discussion and comments that followed each session at the conference. Somewhat unusually, we decided to do so because they reveal additional information and other perspectives that remain relevant.

We also decided to include brief biographies of the various contributors and session moderators. Where possible, we signalled the affiliations of the contributors to the debates. We made every effort to ensure the accuracy of these details as of June 2013, but apologise for any information that might be outdated.

The Afro-Middle East Centre is grateful to Al-Zaytouna Centre for their assistance, and for granting permission for us to translate and publish this book. Our particular thanks go to Mohsen Moh'd Saleh, Al-Zaytouna Centre's general manager, for his responsiveness and encouragement.

Na'eem Jeenah

Executive Director, Afro-Middle East Centre, Johannesburg
2013

Preface to the Arabic edition

Al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies and Consultations is pleased to offer this work to readers, which encompasses the scope of the papers presented and discussions held during a two-day conference hosted by the centre in Beirut.

The conference coincided with the forty-second anniversary of the Palestine Liberation Organization, which was founded in 1964 to embody the Palestinians' national identity and to represent them in their desire for freedom, liberation, the right of return and independence.

The aim of convening the event was to create circumstances that were conducive to an objective and academic forum, to bring together scientists, experts and researchers from all intellectual persuasions, and to encourage free and open discussions. Our engagement in this effort, and in the subsequent publication of this book, stems from our loyalty and patriotism towards our country and our nation.

Close to eighty experts, activists and scholars involved in the Palestinian struggle took part in the conference. Sixteen papers were presented, covering the evolution of the PLO and prospects for its restructuring. Key observations and commentary expressed by the participants in plenary sessions have been included in the volume. Together, the papers and discussions provide a unique insight into the viewpoints of various forces and factions at play within the Palestinian arena.

Al-Zaytouna Centre is an independent research think-tank focused on strategic studies of the Palestinian issue. The conference reported on here reinforced our belief that Palestine has an abundance of intellectuals, researchers and innovators, whose views should be given an opportunity to come to the forefront without being prejudged or unjustly classified. Undoubtedly, we Palestinians have our differences, but our objective is to mobilise these differences in order to broaden our options, not to narrow them. In publishing this book, we aim to increase awareness about the journey of the PLO, and to hasten a closing of ranks among Palestinians and supporters of Palestine, as a means to consolidating a united national position and facilitating the realisation of the legitimate aspirations of all Palestinians.

Mohsen Moh'd Saleh
General Manager, Al-Zaytouna Centre, Beirut
2006

About the contributors and moderators

Contributors

Abdullah al-Ashaal is chair of the Department of Political Science at Ain-Shams University in Cairo, and associate professor for a number of American, British and Canadian universities in the fields of international affairs and international law. He has a PhD in international law from the Pantheon-Assas University (Paris II). A qualified lawyer, Al-Ashaal has appeared before Egypt's high courts and worked as an international arbitrator. He is the author of many publications in Arabic, English, and French.

Ahmad Said Nufal is a professor in the Department of Political Science at Yarmouk University in Jordan. He has a PhD in international politics from the Sorbonne in Paris, and a PhD in political science from Cairo University. He has taught at the Jordan Institute of Diplomacy, Paris Descartes University, the University of Versailles Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines, the University of Toronto, and Kuwait University. He has authored and co-authored a number of books, and published several studies. His publications include *Mashakil Tadrees al-Qadiyyah al-Filastiniyyah fi al-Jami'at al-'Arabiyyah* (The Problems of Teaching the Palestinian Question in Arab Universities) (1990), *al-Watan al-'Arabi wa al-Tahaddiyat al-Mu'asirah* (The Arab Homeland and Contemporary Challenges) (1996), *Mustaqbal Qadiyyat al-Quds min al-Manthur al-Isra'ili* (The Future of the Jerusalem Issue from the Israeli Perspective) (2000), and *Dawr Israel fi Taftit al-Watan al-'Arabi* (The Role of Israel in the Fragmentation of the Arab World) (2007).

Anwar Abu Taha is a member of the Political Bureau of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. He has a PhD in political sociology and a diploma in Islamic studies. He is also a member of the Nationalist Islamic Congress, and is on the board of trustees of Al-Quds International Institution.

Fathi Abu al-Aradat is Fatah's secretary in Lebanon, and a member of its Revolutionary Council. He seeks to ensure civil peace and co-existence in Lebanon.

Helmy Mousa is a seasoned analyst of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and editor of Israeli affairs in the Lebanese daily newspaper *Assafir*.

Marwan Abdul Al was born in 1957 in the Palestinian refugee camp of Nahr al-Bared, in North Lebanon. He is a member of the political bureau of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and leader of the Front in Lebanon. He is also an artist and a writer.

Mohammed Sayed Said (1950–2009) served as the deputy head of al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies. He had a PhD in international affairs from the University of North Carolina. He worked as editor-in-chief of *al-Badil* newspaper, and was one of the founders of the Kefaya movement, also known as the Egyptian Movement for Change.

Mohsen Moh'd Saleh is an associate professor of modern and contemporary Arab history, the general manager of al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies and Consultations in Beirut, editor-in-chief of the annual *Palestinian Strategic Report*, former head of the Department of History and Civilization at the International Islamic University Malaysia (where he received an Excellent Teaching Award in 2002), and former executive manager of the Middle East Studies Centre in Amman. Saleh was granted the Bait al-Maqdis award for Young Muslim Scholars in 1997. He is the author of twelve books and has contributed chapters to seven more; he has also edited or co-edited more than thirty books. He serves as editor of the electronic daily, *Palestine Today*, and has had many articles published in scholarly journals and magazines. He has presented papers at innumerable academic conferences and seminars, both locally and internationally. He is frequently asked to comment on current issues by various media.

Muhammad Tayseer al-Khatib is head of the Isra' Studies Center in Beirut, and an expert in Palestinian studies.

Munir Shafiq was born in Jerusalem in 1934. He was a member of the Communist Party of Jordan until 1965. From 1968 to 1971, Munir was head of Fatah's media and external relations. In 1978 he became the general director of the PLO's Planning Centre in Beirut. He served in this capacity until 1992. Munir serves as the general co-ordinator for the Nationalist Islamic Congress. He is one of the leading ideologues of Arab nationalism, leftism and Islamism. His work bears testimony to the futility of the dominant readings of the Islamic phenomenon, and of the wider political landscape in the region. His books include, *al-Islam fi Ma'rakat al-Hadarah* (Islam in the Battle of Civilisation) (1991), *al-Fikr al-Islami al-Mu'asir wa al-Tahadiyat: Thawrat, Harakat, Kitabat* (Contemporary Islamic Thought and Challenges: Revolutions, Movements, Writings) (1993), *Fi Nathariyyat al-Taghyeer* (On the Theories of Change) (1994),

Min Ittifaq Oslo ila al-Dawlah Thuna'iyat al-Qawmiyyah (From the Oslo Agreement to the Binational State) (1999), and *Fi al-Hadathah wa al-Khitab al-Hadathi* (On Modernity and the Modernist Discourse) (1999).

Nafez Abu Hasna was born in Gaza in 1961. He is a journalist and writer who holds a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Damascus. He is the author of numerous books and articles, including: *Khalid al-Fahoum Yatadhakkar* (Khalid Fahoum Remembers) (1999), *al-Mutadayyinun wa al-'Almaniyyun fi Israel* (The Religious and Secular in Israel) (1999), and *Filastiniyyu 1948 min 'Awdat al-Hawiyyah ila al-Istiqlal* (1948 Palestinians from the Return of Identity to Independence).

Salman Abu-Sitta was born in Mandate Palestine in 1938. He became a refugee at the age of nine when his family was forced into exile during the First Arab-Israeli War in 1948. After graduating from Cairo University's engineering faculty in 1958, Abu-Sitta went to the United Kingdom to continue his post graduate studies there. Since the age of thirty, he has been researching the history of Palestine, particularly the period of the creation of the state of Israel. He has thoroughly documented the Nakba, to ensure that the memories and identity of the occupied homeland are never lost. He is a member of the Palestine National Council, founder and president of the Palestine Land Society, and general co-ordinator of the Right of Return Congress. His published works include *The Atlas of Palestine 1948* (2005), *From Refugees to Citizens at Home* (2001) and *The Atlas of Palestine, 1917–1966* (2010).

Saqr Abu Fakhr is a writer and researcher at the Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies in Beirut. He worked as editor and secretary of *Falastin*, a supplement to the Lebanese daily newspaper, *Assafir*, and as editor-in-chief for the PLO's Planning Centre and the Institute for Palestine Studies.

Shafiq al-Hout (1932–2009) was born in Jaffa, and went into exile in Lebanon in 1948. A founder member of the PLO, he served as an independent member of the PLO's executive committee for many years, and was a close advisor to Yasser Arafat. Al-Hout was the PLO's representative in Lebanon until the PLO was expelled from that country in 1982. In 1993, he resigned from the PLO executive committee (along with Palestinian national poet, Mahmoud Darwish) over the PLO's acceptance of the Oslo Accords. After this, al-Hout remained a member of the Palestine National Council, but opted to keep out of politics, and work on his memoirs. Al-Hout also worked as a journalist, and wrote numerous articles, essays and books, including *al-Yasar wa al-Qawmiyyah al-'Arabiiyah* (The Left and Arab Nationalism) (1959), *al-Filastini bayna al-*

Teah wa al-Dawlah (The Palestinian between Diaspora and State) (1977), *Lahathat laha Tareekh* (Moments of History) (1986), and *Ittifaqiyah Gazza-Ariha Awwala: Al-Hal Al-Marfudh* (Gaza–Jericho First Agreement: The Rejected Agreement) (1994).

Suhail al-Natour is a lawyer who specialises in Palestinian refugees' affairs. He is also the director of the Human Development Centre located in Beirut, co-ordinator of the Palestinian Human Rights Protection Centre, and is on the central committee of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

Usamah Hamdan is head of Hamas's International Relations Department. He was the representative of the movement in Lebanon until 2010. He has a BSc in Chemistry from Yarmouk University in Jordan. In 2004, Hamdan participated in the Cairo dialogue between Palestinian factions, and has also participated in most of the dialogues that have taken place between Hamas and European officials. He is a member of the Nationalist Islamic Congress, the board of trustees of Al-Quds International Institution, and the Arab National Conference. Hamdan has contributed articles to several newspapers, magazines and periodicals.

Moderators

Adnan Sayed Hussein is president of the Lebanese University, a former Lebanese minister of state and a professor of political science. He is a member of the Lebanese Writers' Union, and the General Union of Letters and Arab Writers. He has published numerous studies in Lebanese and other Arabic periodicals on regional and international relations.

Azzam Tamimi was born in Hebron in 1955. He received his PhD from the University of Westminster. He is currently the director of the Institute of Islamic Political Thought in London. Tamimi appears regularly on Al Jazeera and other Arabic and English language television stations. He frequently publishes opinion pieces in *The Guardian*, and is a prominent member of the Muslim Association of Britain and the Stop the War Coalition. He has written several books on Middle Eastern and Islamic politics, including *Rachid Ghannouchi: A Democrat Within Islamism* (the second edition of which was published by the Africa–Middle East Centre in 2013), and *Hamas: A History from Within* (2011).

Bayan Nuwayhed al-Hout, was born in Jerusalem. Following the 1948 war, her family moved to Amman, and then, in the late 1950s, to Lebanon. Al-Hout holds a PhD in political science from the Lebanese University. In 1979, she joined the academic staff of the same university, and has since dedicated herself to historical and political writings, mainly on the Palestinian question. She has published several books, and dozens of articles and essays, among them: *al-Qiyadat wa al-Mu'assasat al-Siyasiyyah fi Filasteen 1917–1948* (Political Institutions and the Political Leadership in Palestine 1917–1948) (1986), *al-Shaykh al-Mujahid Ezzedeen al-Qassam fi Tarikh Filasteen* (Shaykh Ezzedeen al-Qassam in the History of Palestine) (1987), *Filasteen: al-Qadiyyah, al-Sha'b, al-Hadarah: al-Tareekh al-Siyasi min 'Ahd al-Kan'aniyyin hatta al-Qarn al-'Ishreen 1917* (Palestine: The Question, the People, the Culture: A Political History from the Canaanite Era to 1917) (1991). She also prepared *Mudhakkarat 'Ajaj Nuwayhid: Sittun 'Aman ma' al-Qafilah al-'Arabiyyah* (Memoirs of 'Ajaj Nuwayhid: Sixty Years in the Arab Caravan) (1993).

Hassan Nafaa was born in 1947. He enrolled in the Department of Economics and Political Science at the University of Alexandria in Egypt, from where he graduated in 1967. He later obtained a PhD in political science from the Sorbonne in 1977. Nafaa then returned to Cairo to work as a member of the Faculty of Economics and Political Science at Cairo University. He held several posts before becoming head of the Department of Political Science, a position he held for eight years. In February 2007, he was named secretary general of the Arab Thought Forum in Amman, headed by Prince Hassan bin Talal, from which he resigned in August 2009. Nafaa received the State Incentive Award for Political Science in 1998, and the State Excellence Award for the Social Sciences in 2003. He is the author of numerous publications, including: *Masr wa al-Sira' al-'Arabi – al-Isra'eli min al-Sira' al-Mahtum ila al-Taswiyah al-Mustaheelah* (Egypt and the Arab–Israeli Conflict: From the Inevitable Conflict to the Impossible Settlement) (1984), *al-'Arab wa al-Unesco* (The Arabs and UNESCO) (1987), *al-'Umam al-Muttahidah fi Nisf Qarn* (The United Nations: 50 Years After) (1995), *al-Ittihad al-Europpi wa al-Durus al-Mustafadah 'Arabiyyan* (The European Union and Lessons Learned by Arabs) (2004). He has had over a hundred journal articles published in Arabic, English and French. He currently contributes a weekly article and a daily column to *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, Egypt's largest daily newspaper.

Mahmoud Soueid is director of the Institute for Palestine Studies in Beirut, and editor-in-chief of its quarterly publication, *Majallat al-Dirasat al-Filistiniyah*. He is the author of numerous of articles, studies

and books, including: *al-Watan al-Hulum Yabqa Huluman* (The Dream Homeland Stays a Dream), *al-Tajrubah al-Nidaliyyah al-Filastiniyyah* (The Palestinian Experience of struggle), and *al-'Urubah wa Filasteen* (Arabism and Palestine).

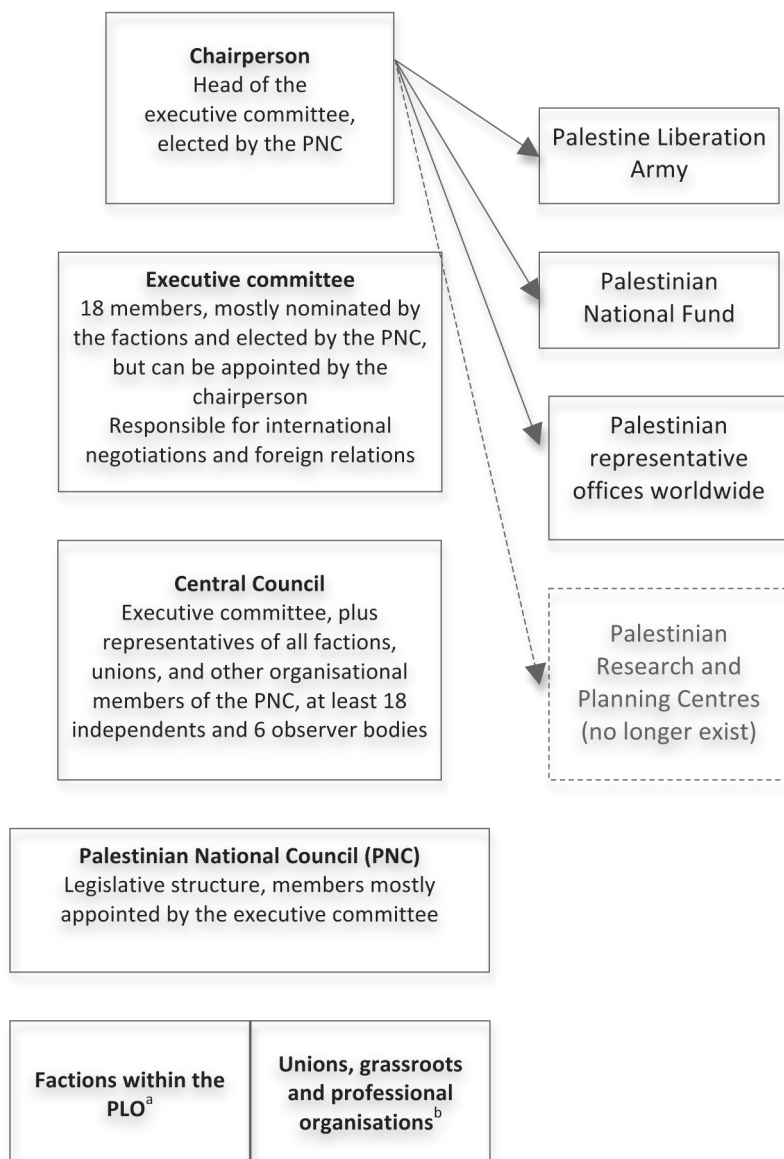
Walid Muhammad Ali is the general manager of the Baheth Centre for Strategic and Palestinian Studies in Beirut, Lebanon.

Frequently used acronyms and abbreviations

ALESCO	Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organisation
DFLP	Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine
EU	European Union
Fida	Palestine Democratic Union
Hamas	Islamic Resistance Movement
PAF	Palestinian Arab Front
PFLP	Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine
PLC	Palestinian Legislative Council
PLF	Palestine Liberation Front
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organisation
PPP	Palestinian People's Party
PPSF	Palestinian Popular Struggle Front
PNC	Palestinian National Council
SAMED	Palestine Martyrs' Works Society
UN	United Nations
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency
USA/US	United States of America
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

PALESTINE LIBERATION ORGANIZATION

(Established in 1964 in Jerusalem by
422 Palestinian national figures)



PALESTINIAN NATIONAL AUTHORITY

(Established in September 1993 in
Washington by the Oslo Accords)



Notes: a. Factions within the PLO include Fatah; Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP); Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP); Palestinian People's Party (PPP); Palestine Liberation Front (PLF); Arab Liberation Front (ALF) (aligned to the Iraqi Ba'ath Party); As-Sa'iqa (Syrian-controlled Ba'athists); Palestine Democratic Union (Fida); Palestinian Popular Struggle Front (PPSF); Palestinian Arab Front (PAF). b. Unions and grassroots organisations affiliated to the PLO include: General Union of Palestinian Labour; General Union of Palestinian Journalists and Writers; General Union of Palestinian Youth; General Union of Palestinian Women; General Union of Palestinian Teachers; General Union of Palestinian Engineers; General Union of Palestinian Lawyers; General Union of Palestinian Physicians; General Union of Palestinian Artists; General Union of Palestinian Peasants.

Source: Adapted from a diagram by the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, last updated in August 2010, available at <http://bit.ly/169YbRC>

INTRODUCTION



Introduction

Mohsen Moh'd Saleh

Neither the West Bank nor the Gaza Strip were under occupation when the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was founded, so the purpose of the fledgling resistance organisation was to liberate Palestinian territories west of the West Bank (of the Jordan River) upon which Israel was established in 1948.

Both the (Pan-Arab) National Charter and the Palestinian National Charter were vividly clear in asserting the Palestinian people's undisputed right to their full territories annexed by Israel, and in highlighting armed struggle as the sole means to liberation, while branding the Jewish state as a racist entity that must be eliminated.

By 1974, the PLO had successfully evolved into the legitimate and sole representative of the Palestinian people, and managed to gain international recognition for the Palestinian issue. Forty-two years later, we find ourselves faced with a rich history, filled with lessons and examples of both unwavering heroism and bitter frustration. We are humbled by the long march that the PLO has been on, beginning with its demand for full liberation, and the famous Three Nos, moving on to its Ten Point Program, followed by its Declaration of the State of Palestine, and its recognition of United Nations Resolution 242. The Oslo Accords, and the convening of the twenty-first session of the Palestinian National Council in 1996, then excised some of the most fundamental and critical articles from the National Charter, thereby plotting a new course and a fresh identity for the PLO.

The conference on which this book is based took place at a time of heightened interest in the issue of the restructuring of the PLO. The Palestinian people were at a crossroads. They had to decide whether to forge ahead and close ranks, reaching for an inclusive national programme, embracing the principle of a peaceful rotation of power, abandoning blood-letting and conceding the sanctity of Palestinian blood, promoting transparency, and mobilising all resources to confront the Zionist project. Failing this, the Palestinian situation was poised to deteriorate further, playing into the Israeli plan to create a new reality in Palestine.

Several years have elapsed since the conference was held, and the publication of the English translation of the discussions in 2013 seems to warrant an update on developments that have taken place in the intervening years.

The PLO, 2006–2011

Although the PLO established and gave legitimacy to the Palestinian National Authority in 1994, the Palestinian Authority has since greatly expanded, and the PLO has shrunk and retreated to the point where an outsider might mistake it for a mere branch or subsection of the Authority. Having bled the PLO and its institutions dry, the PLO's leaders (who also head up the Palestinian Authority) have actively negated and marginalised the role of the PLO, confining it to the 'sick room', and limiting it to providing a stamp or seal of approval, and only when necessary to legitimise some action or resolution of the Authority.

The PLO's National Council held just twenty sessions between its founding in 1964 and 1991. In fact, in the two decades between 1991 and 2011, the National Council held just one session! This contravenes the organisation's own bylaws, which call for the Council to meet once every year. In other words, the National Council has, since the signing of the 1993 Oslo Accords, given up its legislative and supervisory role, and has been isolated and marginalised vis-à-vis Palestinian decision making.

Furthermore, the National Council meeting that was held in April 1996 took place after the United States and Israel forced the PLO to annul those articles of the Palestinian National Charter that were antithetical to Israel and to the aims of Zionism. At the 1996 meeting, without the knowledge or consent of PNC president, Salim Zanoun, and without being referred to the relevant committees, Yasser Arafat accredited more than 450 new voting participants, bringing the number of members eligible to participate in amending the Charter to over 850.¹

It is clear that efforts made towards reactivating the PLO and rebuilding its institutions are linked to the comprehensive reform and reordering that is taking place in Palestinian politics. It is equally apparent that this process cannot be successful without negotiations between Fatah, Hamas and the other factions. Palestinians must reach a political consensus and forge a common national programme. Despite the centrality of this issue to the March 2005 Cairo Declaration, negotiations over PLO reform have since been hindered by the fears of some Palestinians, certain Arab

states, and various international powers about the potential dominance of Hamas. These fears intensified after that party won the 2006 elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

Palestinians are internally divided by different and conflicting visions of how to deal with the priorities and principles of national action, how to manage their conflict with the occupation in relation to resistance and compromise, and how to respond to Arab and international pressures. It is, therefore, unfair to oversimplify the differences between Fatah and Hamas, and between the governments in Ramallah and Gaza, as merely a struggle for power and authority. The steadfastness of Hamas in the face of Israeli aggression (including the blockade of the Gaza Strip, the closure of its institutions, the imprisonment of its representatives on the Palestinian Legislative Council, and the hunt for its supporters in the West Bank) cannot be interpreted merely as a desire to secure a better position in the Palestinian Authority. Similarly, it is incorrect to interpret Fatah's insistence that Hamas recognise agreements signed by the PLO, and forms a government that commits itself to the PLO's political programme, and to the Quartet's conditions,² other than as pushing for a political programme that includes recognition of Israel, compromises over most of the land occupied in 1948, and the cessation of all resistance.

Essentially, intra-Palestinian negotiations have suffered from three fundamental crises:

- The first is about the course that the Palestinian national struggle should take, including its basic principles and priorities, its methods, and its political programme. Some propose an ideological Islamic path for resistance, as well as for managing the conflict and seeking change. Others advocate a patriotic and pragmatic path, taking Arab and other immediate realities into account.
- The second crisis is one of confidence, and has deepened as a result of political divisions and insecurity related to Hamas's takeover of the Gaza Strip, the Palestinian Authority's attempts to eliminate Hamas in collaboration with the occupation, and because of ongoing media and armed confrontations between the two parties.
- The third crisis relates to external pressures and conditions – the Quartet's conditions as well as those imposed by the United States and Israel hang like the sword of Damocles over intra-Palestinian negotiations. That is, American threats to stop the Palestinian talks, cut off aid and resume the blockade of the West Bank if

Hamas were to form part of a Palestinian Authority government that does not meet the conditions set by the Quartet, have made one thing clear. The US will not object to Palestinian reconciliation as long as this has a predefined outcome: namely, a Fatah victory in elections, and reassertion of control over the Gaza Strip, as well as the containment, marginalisation, and delegitimation of Hamas. Any other outcome will see the continuation of the blockade and a deepening of the crisis.

- Thus, there is much to be done to reform the PLO and rebuild its institutions in terms of: (i) building confidence among its members; (ii) formulating a national programme and priorities away from the influence of external pressures; and (iii) coming to an agreement on a peaceful rotation of power.

From the Cairo Agreement to the military takeover, 2005–2007

In early 2005, Palestinians entered a new period that tended toward calm, and a process of putting their house in order. Palestinian factions held intensive talks from 15 to 17 March 2005, which culminated in what has become known as the Cairo Declaration. This agreement stressed the *thawabet* (that is, the fundamental principles or ‘red lines’ of the Palestinian struggle). Consensus was reached on holding Palestinian legislative elections, continuing the process of reforming the Palestinian Authority, and reorganising the PLO on mutually agreed bases, as well as to include all Palestinian factions within its ranks.

During 2005, consensus was almost reached that the reformation of the Palestinian National Council would comprise 300 members, half of whom would represent the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and half of whom would represent Palestinians in the diaspora. However, Hamas’s victory in the 2006 elections for the Palestinian Authority’s Legislative Council came as a shock to Fatah, which has long dominated the PLO, and the PLO’s National Council.

At the opening session of the Palestinian Legislative Council on 16 February 2006, the president of the National Council, Salim Zanoun, stated that the 132 members of the Legislative Council would be added to the 783-member National Council. Essentially, this would have meant drowning elected representatives in a sea of appointees. To say the least, this move disrupted all the progress that had been made in 2005 towards meaningfully reviving the PLO.

After the 2006 election results were released, the PLO president, Mahmoud Abbas, was quick to assert the overriding power of the PLO, stressing that the PLO was the decision-making authority for all negotiations, including any that the Palestinian Authority might be involved in, and regardless of which party led the Authority. Abbas thus sought to insulate the 'peace process' from any contrary ideas that a Hamas government might bring to the process, while simultaneously trying to impose the PLO's political programme on the newly elected Hamas leaders. Perhaps unintentionally, Abbas also stressed the importance of expanded Palestinian efforts to rebuild and revitalise the PLO and its apparatuses.³ In addition, Abbas transferred responsibility for oversight of Palestinian embassies abroad from the Palestinian Authority's Ministry of Foreign Affairs back to the PLO, after having transferred this responsibility to his office only a few months earlier.

At the end of March 2006, the heads of the Palestinian factions held a meeting in Damascus, which was also attended by Faruq Qaddumi, head of Fatah's political department and secretary-general of its Central Committee. At the meeting, participants decided to form a committee that would be tasked with rebuilding the PLO.⁴ Reports were later published confirming that the committee had indeed reached a draft agreement on how to proceed with rebuilding. Over the next few months, other meetings on the same issue were held in Damascus with Qaddumi's participation.⁵ However, as Abbas's grip over the PLO and Fatah grew tighter, differences between him and Qaddumi deepened. Qaddumi's political and moral influence then began to wane dramatically. On 9 November 2006, Abbas appointed his close aide, Yasser Abed Rabbo, as secretary of the PLO's executive committee. And on 18 December 2006, Abbas shut down the PLO's political office in Amman. This move was considered a direct blow to Qaddumi as it limited his work to the supervision of his department in Tunis.⁶ Thus divisions within Fatah added to the difficulties involved in rebuilding the PLO as a whole.⁷

In the midst of these internal conflicts, and the state of disruption and blockades imposed on the Palestinian areas following Hamas's electoral victory, the National Reconciliation Document, (also known as the 'Prisoners' Document') emerged.⁸ Endorsed by Palestinian political prisoners from various factions, including Fatah, Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the document called for:

- National unity;
- A peaceful rotation of power;

- Co-operation and complementarity between the institutions of the presidency, the government, the Legislative Council and the judiciary;
- The formation of a government of national unity; and
- Progress with regard to reforming the Palestinian Authority and the PLO.

In Article 3 of the document, the prisoners called for the continuation of the negotiations process alongside resistance efforts. In Article 7, they state that administering the negotiations should be the prerogative of the president of the PLO and the Palestinian Authority, 'on the basis of adherence and accomplishment of Palestinian national goals, on the condition that any final agreement be submitted to the new Palestinian National Council for ratification or to seek popular approval of such an agreement by general referendum wherever possible'.⁹

The document was welcomed by Abbas and the PLO's executive committee because aspects of it can be interpreted as accepting the negotiations process led by the president of the PLO and the Palestinian Authority. The document also focuses on the establishment of a Palestinian state on territory occupied in 1967, without stating whether such statehood would be considered a final goal, and without affirming or denying Palestinians' right to liberate the territory occupied in 1948. Furthermore, the Prisoner's Document refers the adoption of the results of negotiations with Israel to the Palestinian National Council or to a referendum, despite Hamas's position that fundamental principles cannot legitimately be subject to any kind of vote.

After lengthy discussions between the Palestinian factions, the Prisoner's Document appeared in amended form on 28 June 2006. The amended version retained much of the original document intact, and several articles use language that is vague enough to allow for Fatah, Hamas and other factions to fall back on different interpretations. The articles on the negotiations process remained largely unaltered, apart from an amendment to Article 4, to the effect that the totality of the Palestinian political movement must preserve the rights of the Palestinian people and the fundamental principles of the Palestinian issue.

Despite what seemed to be a concession by Hamas to the PLO and the Palestinian Authority's authority over the negotiations process, talks of the formation of a government of national unity faced continuous obstacles. Insecurity prevailed, along with the tightening of the Israeli

and international blockades, as well as the intensification of the Israeli campaign against Hamas, and resistance forces more generally, with the capture of Gilad Shalit. It was in this context that, on 29 January 2007, Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz called for talks to be held between Fatah and Hamas in Makkah.

The Saudi monarch's call was welcomed by both parties, and meetings were held from 6 to 8 February 2007, culminating in the 'Makkah Agreement' between Fatah and Hamas. This agreement stressed the impermissibility of shedding Palestinian blood, consensus on forming a government of national unity, taking steps towards reforming the PLO, as well as affirming both parties' commitment to the principles of political partnership and political pluralism.¹⁰

Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh then submitted his Cabinet to President Abbas on 15 March 2007. Abbas gave his approval, and the Legislative Council approved the Cabinet on 17 March 2007. Haniyeh then gave a speech before the Legislative Council that was considered to be the new government's programme of action, in which he stated that administration of negotiations remained the prerogative of the PLO.

The formation of the national unity government created an environment of optimism and hope that the blockade imposed upon the Palestinian people would be lifted, and that the state of insecurity and lawlessness would be ended. It was hoped that the new political leaders would express the logic and essence of the Makkah Agreement, based on the political partnership between Fatah and Hamas (as well as the other factions). It was clear that three structures would be directly affected, namely: the government, its ministries and its associated bodies; the security forces; and the PLO.

It soon became evident, however, that a different understanding of the political partnership had arisen within the Palestinian presidency, and among influential elements in Fatah. This understanding held that the partnership between Fatah and Hamas was limited to the Palestinian Authority and its ministries, and did not extend to the security forces or the PLO, and that these latter two remained under the jurisdiction of the Palestinian presidency. This disagreement over the meaning and content of the partnership drove a wedge between the parties and quickly began to weaken the new government. Subsequently, no meaningful effort was put into reactivating the PLO or its institutions.¹¹

In addition, while consultations were taking place between Abbas and Haniyeh on the formation of a government of national unity,

Abbas issued a decree on 2 March 2007 appointing Muhammad Dahlan as 'adviser on national security to the President of the Palestinian Authority'. (This was in addition to Dahlan's appointment as secretary of the National Security Council.) In Article 3 of the decree, Dahlan was given the right to participate in the meetings of the PLO executive committee to present and discuss issues within his mandate.¹² Not only was this an affront to Hamas, but it violated the PLO's own regulatory framework, as the meetings of the executive committee have traditionally been limited to members elected by the Palestinian National Council. Not surprisingly, Dahlan's appointment raised concerns among Hamas leaders and others about Abbas's seriousness with regard to reform and political partnership.

The Makkah Agreement lasted less than four months. Although Haniyeh's forming a government of national unity won the confidence of the Palestinian Legislative Council, insecurity and lawlessness grew even more intense during this period. The United States, Israel, and an identifiable grouping within Fatah (in which Dahlan was a major figure) made various attempts to wreck the agreement. Open conflict between Fatah and Hamas then resulted in Hamas taking over the Gaza Strip on 14 June 2007, and the subsequent formation of separate governments in Ramallah and Gaza. In this process, physical distance, bloodshed and further mistrust were added to the existing political confusion and conflict over the distribution of powers. The likelihood of Fatah and Hamas reaching mutual understanding via civil and institutional communication declined.

From the military takeover to the Israeli war on Gaza, 2007–2008

Abbas and his supporters accused Hamas of having carried out a 'bloody coup', and asserted that there was no way of re-establishing relations between the two groupings unless Hamas reversed the effects of its takeover, and affirmed its commitment to Palestinian, Arab and international agreements and laws. In a speech delivered to the PLO's Central Council on 18 July 2007, Abbas declared the 2005 Cairo Declaration to be at an end.¹³

Hamas, meanwhile, saw its actions as legitimate, and argued that it had been forced to take them, given that they had been ordered by the prime minister of the Palestinian Authority (who was also the interior minister at the time), and supported by the majority of the Legislative

Council. They cited the insecurity and lawlessness systematically fostered by the Authority's security forces, noting that these forces had refused to obey instructions issued by their own elected government.

From Hamas's perspective, the caretaker government led by Haniyeh was legitimate in terms of the Palestinian Basic Law, and the formation of another government in Ramallah was the real coup. Hamas had not objected to dialogue so long as this was not prefaced by unreasonable preconditions. Hamas refused to recognise Fatah's overruling of the Legislative Council and the legitimacy of the government of national unity, in favour of the presidency. Hamas also refused to recognise the right of PLO institutions to exercise powers beyond their mandates in order to bypass the legislative institutions of the Palestinian Authority. Hamas called for the security issue to be urgently addressed, along with the rebuilding of the security services on a national and professional basis, and in a way that ensured that these forces were purged of any corrupt or partisan elements.¹⁴

The Palestinian presidency held tight to its decision, ejecting Hamas from its orbit. To achieve this, the presidency required a legitimate reference point for its decisions, and resorted to the PLO and its institutions, while ignoring the Legislative Council. The PLO suddenly became visible on a daily basis once again, despite its almost complete disappearance in the preceding years. PLO institutions began to meet, discuss and decide upon the day-to-day affairs of the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, despite the PLO being, as agreed, a reference point rather than an executive or legislative body operating within the framework of the Authority.¹⁵

In line with this orientation, the PLO's executive committee held an emergency meeting on 14 June 2007, the very day on which the situation in the Gaza Strip changed. In this meeting, the committee approved several recommendations and placed them before the president to decide upon. These were:

- Dismissing Haniyeh's government (a decision within the powers of the president);
- Declaring a state of emergency;
- Forming a government to enforce the state of emergency; and
- Conducting early elections.¹⁶

Abbas immediately adopted the recommendations, ordering their implementation through three ordinances. These ordinances have since become the primary means through which Abbas uses the state

of emergency as a pretext to bypass legitimate Palestinian institutions. The task of forming a new emergency government was allocated to Salam Fayyad.

In July 2007, Fatah attempted to change the leadership of the Legislative Council by trying to exploit the fact that Israel had arrested several Hamas leaders. The attempt failed when Fatah still failed to form a majority, so Fatah resorted to the PLO. A meeting of the Palestinian Central Council was convened on 18 July 2007 at which Abbas gave a speech that called on the PLO to ratify his decision to hold early presidential and legislative elections on the basis of proportional representation, and announced the end of the Cairo Declaration signed between all the factions, the document that expressed their consensus regarding the reconstruction of the PLO.

The Central Council agreed to everything Abbas had requested by including the principle of holding elections. At this point, the dangers of holding elections in the West Bank but not in the Gaza Strip became clear – this action would entrench the division between the two areas. Hamas's response was that Abbas did not have the constitutional authority to call early elections. Hamas stressed its 'adherence to the Makkah Agreement and the Cairo Declaration'.¹⁷ In a press conference held in Qatar, Khaled Meshaal, head of Hamas's political bureau, stated that Hamas rejected the bypassing of existing legitimate Palestinian political bodies. He argued that it was unjust to focus on the legitimacy of the presidency while ignoring the legitimacy of the Legislative Council and the government of national unity. Meshaal also stated that Hamas completely rejected the use of PLO institutions as alternative reference points for the Legislative Council, and reasserted that his organisation saw the rebuilding of the security apparatuses on a national and professional basis, and clearing these apparatuses of corruption and suspect elements as the first step towards national reconciliation.¹⁸

In effect, Hamas's stance paralysed the Legislative Council, and stymied the call for early elections. On 2 September 2007, Abbas took the initiative by adopting a new electoral law that established a system of proportional representation in legislative elections. This legislation includes a clause requiring each parliamentary or presidential candidate to have a prior commitment to the political stance of the PLO, thus depriving anyone opposed to the PLO of the right to stand for election. Since Hamas is not a member of the PLO, and opposes many of its decisions and policies, this move further divided the two groups.¹⁹

The role of the smaller factions

The outcome of the January 2006 elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council redrew the Palestinian political map, creating a system that can best be described as bipolar. Between them, Fatah and Hamas harvested about 86 per cent of the vote and 90 per cent of the parliamentary seats. The left-wing factions within the PLO – the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), the Palestinian People's Party (PPP) and the Palestinian Democratic Union (FIDA) – won less than 7 per cent of the vote, and 3.8 per cent of the seats. Meanwhile, the Islamic Jihad movement boycotted the election, but according to opinion polls, would probably have received between 3 and 5 per cent of the voters' support.

On the whole, the behaviour of the smaller factions tended to work against the marginalisation of their role. They argued that their role on a national and historic level, and in the resistance movement, should be taken into account. They also lobbied for a political system based on national consensus rather than on a quota between Fatah and Hamas. In this context, the factions sought to increase their political weight and impact upon Palestinian decision making, while maintaining those aspects of their identities which set them apart and prevented them from being absorbed under the wing of either Fatah or Hamas.

Therefore, the demand for elections to be based on proportional representation was proposed jointly by the PFLP, DFLP, PPP and FIDA, as this would enable these parties to play the role of kingmaker between Hamas and Fatah, neither of which would be likely to win more than half of the votes in a new election. The system of proportional representation enables smaller factions to increase their impact in the democratic game.

Although the national and political programmes of these key PLO factions (particularly the PFLP and the DFLP) are closer to those of Hamas than of Fatah, Hamas has been entirely apathetic about winning these factions over. Both Fronts oppose the Oslo Accords, have embraced the resistance paradigm, and have called for PLO reform, yet Hamas has failed to persuade them to accelerate the process of PLO reform.

While the left-wing factions strongly criticised Hamas's 'coup' and associated actions in the Gaza Strip, they have done little to oppose decrees, actions and security campaigns carried out by Abbas and his presidency, or actions carried out by Salam Fayyad's government against

Hamas in the West Bank. Indeed, the behaviour of these factions in the PLO's executive committee and Central Council has contradicted their stated political positions so often that critics describe them as effectively offering 'political cover' for Abbas and his policies.

On one level, it is possible to attribute the behaviour of the leftist factions to the notion that these factions are ideologically closer to Fatah – in the sense that they share a secular perspective that is incompatible with the Islamist tendencies of Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. However, Hamas has done little to establish common ground with these factions, or to reassure them that Hamas's leadership of the national project would respect and accommodate the roles and views of others, and not negate or exclude them. Moreover, Hamas has yet to agree to the PLO programme, which both the left factions and Fatah have agreed to. Abbas has also agreed with the factions' call for proportional representation in the Palestinian Legislative Council and in the Palestinian National Council, a position for which Hamas has shown no open support.

In addition, some believe that Fatah's control over the PLO's financial resources, upon which these factions' budgets and cadres' salaries are dependent, affects decision-making processes within the factions to some extent. Commentators also point to what they see as a state of crisis and division within some of these factions, between the positions of their leaders inside Palestine (who are close to Abbas), and the more oppositional positions of their leaders abroad.

The Palestinian factions, particularly those under the umbrella of the PLO, have tried to provide a vision for ending Palestinian division. On 21 July 2008, Saleh Zaidan, a member of the DFLP politburo, stated that high-ranking factional leaders had prepared a working document in the hope of initiating a national dialogue that would end the split between Fatah and Hamas.²⁰ About a month and a half later, leading PLO figures stated that PLO factions were working towards the formation of a 'caretaker government' as a way out of the impasse created by the existence of the two separate governments in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. They went on to declare that the PFLP, DFLP, PPP, FIDA and the Popular Struggle Front all supported this initiative. The same leaders also shared their view that Fatah was 'paralysed' by Europe and America's backing of Salam Fayyad as prime minister. They suggested that aid payments were being linked to Fayyad retaining both his position and his independence from Fatah, and thus not being subject to its decisions.²¹

The dialogue between Fatah and Hamas

After Hamas's takeover of the Gaza Strip, Abbas, the Ramallah government and Fatah demanded that two sets of conditions be met before dialogue with Hamas could begin: (i) Hamas would have to retreat from the coup in the Gaza Strip, and apologise to the Palestinian people; and (ii) Hamas would have to recognise the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of all Palestinians, abide by the agreements signed by the PLO, and accept the Arab and international conditions that the PLO had accepted.

Furthermore, the Ramallah leaders were willing to speak to Hamas to try and prevent the isolation of the PLO leadership and government, end the blockade imposed on the Palestinian people, and enable early presidential and parliamentary elections to take place.

Fatah, however, refused to enter into a bilateral dialogue with Hamas, preferring to give itself broader legitimacy and greater impetus by having either an interlocutor in the form of a PLO delegation, or sessions that included all factions.

For its part, Hamas argued that the essence of the problem lay between it and Fatah, and proposed that the first step should take the form of a bilateral dialogue between the two parties in order to resolve key issues before broadening out the dialogue to others. Hamas also insisted that the dialogue should take place with no preconditions, that all issues should be open for discussion, and that all political prisoners should be released. In addition, Hamas refused to recognise the PLO as the Palestinians' sole legitimate representative until it could be reformed and reactivated, such that Hamas would be accepted into the PLO as a member. Nor was Hamas willing to commit itself to agreements signed by the PLO, especially those that contravened the fundamental principles of Palestinian resistance. In particular, Hamas rejected the PLO's agreement to recognise Israel, its right to land occupied in 1948, and other temporally undefined agreements.

With both sides set in their positions, no real dialogue took place. Discussion about the possibility of dialogue between Fatah and Hamas, and the need to put the Palestinian house in order, took up most of 2008. An atmosphere of mutual accusations and mistrust prevailed throughout the year and prevented any negotiations. On 9 August 2007, Yemeni president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, had proposed a six-point plan to help resolve the rift. Hamas welcomed the move, but Abbas's party remained silent. On 9 February 2008 Abbas visited Yemen and

met with Saleh. The Yemeni proposal was then amended to include the most important of Ramallah's conditions for the intra-Palestinian talks. A new Yemeni proposal was drawn up, which called for a return of the situation in the Gaza Strip to what it was before 13 June 2007, adherence to commitments already made by the PLO, and the holding of early presidential and legislative council elections.

Hamas agreed to attend talks in Yemen from 19 to 23 March 2008. Abbas opted to attend under the umbrella of the PLO, and the PLO delegation included Saleh Rafat, secretary-general of FIDA, and Qais Abu Laila, a leader of the DFLP. Seeing the core of the problem as being between Hamas and Fatah, Hamas took the presence of these other leaders as an indication of Abbas's lack of seriousness with regard to the talks. In the four days of talks, the essence of the dispute centred on the first article of the proposal. Eventually, it was agreed that the phrase 'adherence to the commitments made by the PLO' could be deleted from the text of the proposal. The debate then moved on to the substance of the proposal itself, with Hamas arguing that it was a framework for dialogue and not for implementation.

The talks ended with agreement on what was termed the 'Sana'a Declaration' on 23 March 2008, which is separate from the Yemeni initiative. The declaration was signed by Azzam al-Ahmad of Fatah and Musa Abu Marzuq of Hamas. In the declaration, Fatah and Hamas agreed that the Yemeni initiative was a framework for the resumption of dialogue between the two parties, to return the Palestinian situation to what it was before the 2007 events in the Gaza Strip, and a confirmation of the unity of the Palestinian homeland, people and authority.

As soon as it was issued, the Sana'a Declaration was subject to severe attack by Abbas's advisers, as was Azzam al-Ahmad for signing it. A war of words erupted between al-Ahmad, Nimer Hammad and Yasser Abed Rabbo. Abbas himself sided with his advisers, refusing to accept the Yemeni initiative as a framework for dialogue and insisting that it should operate as a framework for implementation.²² It appears that after a few days, al-Ahmad retreated back to the position taken by Abbas. The obstruction of the Yemeni initiative and the Sana'a Declaration showed that the atmosphere was not yet ripe for Palestinian reconciliation, and that the preconditions set for the talks had sucked away their momentum.

Abbas then launched a new call for dialogue, in which (because of its influence in the Palestinian and Arab political arena, as well as its alignment with the political line that Abbas represented) Egypt played

an active role. On the evening of 5 June 2008, Abbas met with the PLO executive, which included representatives of several factions, and renewed his call for dialogue, using strongly conciliatory language. A committee was formed to follow up on the issue of reconciliation, and included: Hikmat Zeid, Nimer Hammad, Ahmed Abdel Rahman from Fatah; Abdul Rahim Mallouh of the PFLP; Mahmoud Ismail of the Arab Liberation Front; and Mustafa Barghouti as an independent. President Abbas then immediately requested that President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt sponsor and host a Palestinian dialogue, and Hamas welcomed the initiative.

By the end of September 2008, there were reports that Cairo had prepared a paper outlining five key issues for the Palestinian talks, and that there was almost consensus from the parties on four of these, namely: refraining from violence; the formation of a government of national consensus; the rehabilitation of the security apparatuses; the rehabilitation of the PLO, dates for presidential and legislative elections.²³

Tensions ran high again in late October 2008, when Hamas began to suspect that the talks might not lead to genuine reconciliation, but would favour Fatah. Hamas feared that no meaningful responses would be forthcoming in relation its demands that there be equality between the parties, and that Abbas attend all the meetings as head of Fatah and a key party to the dispute, rather than as a sponsor or convener of the talks.

On 8 November 2008, Hamas and three of the other factions, (the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the PFLP-General Command, and Sa'iqa), informed the Egyptian hosts that they were no longer willing to attend the Cairo meeting.²⁴ The PLO's executive committee issued a statement placing 'full responsibility' for the failure of the Cairo meeting squarely on Hamas's shoulders.²⁵

The PLO's Central Council, despite the reservations surrounding its authority, then gave Abbas the support he wanted by electing him president of the State of Palestine on 23 November 2008. This was before the end of his term as president of the Palestinian Authority.

Meanwhile, Faruq Qaddumi was one of several PLO and Fatah leaders who vehemently and openly criticised Abbas and his supporters. On 25 February 2008, Qaddumi (head of the PLO political department) criticised Abbas for forcing a number of political department staff into retirement. In his criticism, Qaddumi referred to the illegality and illegitimacy of the PLO's executive committee,²⁶ stressing that the

committee had lost its quorum.²⁷ At the same time, Qaddumi called for Hamas and other Palestinian factions to join the PLO with no preconditions, for the convening of a new National Council, the election of a new executive committee, and the development of mechanisms to ensure PLO reform.²⁸ Qaddumi put forward a programme in which he called for the separation of the PLO and Palestinian Authority, the separation of their respective presidencies, maintaining a commitment to the right of resistance, the right of return and respect for Palestinian pluralism.²⁹

At the same time, various leading Palestinian figures continued to call for the reactivation of the PLO, the rebuilding of its institutions, including its National Council, and to emphasise the right of return for all Palestinians. A group of these figures, most prominent among them being Shafiq al-Hout, Salman Abu Sitta and Bilal al-Hasan, met in Beirut in May 2007, and continued their activity in 2008.

From the Israeli war on Gaza to the reconciliation agreement, 2009–2011

During the Israeli war on the Gaza Strip (from 27 December 2008 to 18 January 2009), the performance of the PLO left much to be desired. Frustration resulting from this, as well as the failure of talks on reforming the PLO, led Khaled Mesh'al to declare on 28 January 2009 that Hamas was working 'with all the factions to create a Palestinian representation and leadership body that will uphold the right of return and the fundamental principles of the Palestinian struggle.'³⁰

Mesh'al's comments sparked a storm of controversy. Fatah and its allies launched an attack on Hamas, capitalising on Palestinians' desire for national unity and the still widespread sentiment that the PLO represented the spiritual home of the Palestinian people. Mesh'al's comments were turned against him and used to undermine Hamas, the popularity of which had reached new heights given its steadfastness in the face of Israeli aggression in the Gaza Strip. At the same time, the Palestinian Authority and its leadership in Ramallah were harshly criticised. Fatah and Palestinian Authority officials made statements to the effect that: they would prevent Hamas from 'trying to bury the PLO',³¹ 'Mesh'al's attempts are bound to fail'; Fatah would stop the 'Iranian conspiracy';³² Hamas had refused from the outset to engage in 'Palestinian national action';³³ and that Mesh'al's statements symbolised 'a plot and a coup against the PLO' that were to be 'rejected and denounced'.³⁴

Rather than attempting to address the poor state of affairs in which the PLO found itself, the debate thus took a hostile and provocative turn. Few in Fatah or the PLO stopped to consider who would benefit most from the crippling of the PLO's legislative and executive arms, from the organisation's conversion into a mere tool of a specific faction, or its relegation to a back room until required to endorse or ratify a particular decision. However, Fatah leader, Hussam Khader, put things plainly when he called for diligent discussion, noting that the leadership of the PLO, Fatah and the Palestinian Authority should be 'prepared not only for partnership with Hamas, but also for it to lead the PLO'.³⁵ Mohammad Nazzal, a member of Hamas's politburo, explained that Meshaal did not intend his statement to be interpreted as calling for the abolition of the PLO, or for the building of an alternative institution. What Meshaal had intended was to call for a structure through which Palestinian factions that are excluded from the PLO could co-ordinate their actions.³⁶

In any event, the PLO has since become a key item on the agenda of the intra-Palestinian negotiations, and was the subject of extensive discussions in six rounds of talks that took place in the first half of 2009. In these talks, agreement was reached on matters relating to PLO reform as outlined in an Egyptian proposal, which called for:

- The activation and development of the PLO based on the consent of all factions.
- The formation of a new Palestinian National Council, with broad representation of Palestinians in Palestine and the diaspora.
- The establishment of a committee to develop the PLO, and determine the relationship between the institutions, structures and functions of both the PLO and the Palestinian Authority, while maintaining the PLO as the higher reference body and ensuring that work and mandates are not duplicated.³⁷

The committee would act as a co-ordination mechanism, without political entitlements or obligations. It was to begin its work immediately after the signing of the agreement, and its mandate was to end after the election of a new Palestinian National Council. Until then, the committee was to lay down the foundations and mechanisms for the PLO's functioning, address crucial issues in political and national affairs, and follow up on the decisions taken in the talks. The Egyptian proposal also stated that the committee would be composed of sixteen members from Fatah, Hamas, other factions and independents, and

that Hamas and Fatah could each nominate eight of the committee members after which President Abbas would issue a presidential decree establishing the committee. Abbas was also supposed to act as a reference point for this committee given his position as head of the PLO and the Palestinian Authority.

Egypt submitted a proposed final text of the proposal. Egypt then asked Fatah and Hamas to sign the twenty-two-page document before 15 October 2010. In the context of the Goldstone Report scandal, Fatah was quick to agree, but Hamas asked for more time to review the text. Hamas then asked for a number of amendments to be made within the body of the document, or for an annex to be added to give their amendments some political and legal weight. The most significant of these amendments were: (i) the demand that the interim leadership, which would take charge until the elections for PLO institutions, would be able to work without obstruction; (ii) that the elections commission be formed by President Abbas in partnership with Hamas; (iii) that a higher committee on matters of security be formed by President Abbas in partnership with Hamas to implement the agreement; and (iv) that the security forces in the West Bank and Gaza Strip be rebuilt and restructured.

According to the Egyptian proposal, the Palestinian factions had reached consensus on the holding of presidential and Legislative Council elections, as well as Palestinian National Council elections simultaneously on 28 June 2010, and this date was not contested by any of the factions. However, the crisis surrounding the release of the Goldstone Report, as well as Hamas's insistence on the inclusion of its amendments in the paper, led Abbas to issue a presidential decree on 23 October 2009 declaring that presidential and Legislative Council elections would be brought forward to 24 January 2010.³⁸

The Palestinian Central Council declared its support for the decree,³⁹ and Fatah stated that the decree was a constitutional necessity for paving the way out of the crisis. Hamas rejected the decree, barring the elections commission from operating in the Gaza Strip, and threatened to act against anyone who tried to prepare for elections.⁴⁰ On 12 November 2009, the elections commission announced that it would be unable to hold elections in accordance with the schedule set by the presidential decree because of its inability to work in the Gaza Strip.⁴¹ Abbas and Fatah then abandoned the January 2010 elections.

Abbas declared that he would not be running for the presidency of the Palestinian Authority, even though the Fatah leadership and the

PLO's executive committee were encouraging him to run for a second term. He noted that he had also received messages from Israel, the USA, Egypt, the king of Jordan and others from the so-called axis of 'moderation' to convince him to reverse his decision.⁴²

The PLO Central Council then attempted to provide for the fact that elections could not be held. They issued a decree on 16 December 2009 extending the mandate of the president, the Palestinian Authority and the Legislative Council until such time as presidential and legislative elections could be held in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.⁴³ The Central Council's decision not only provided political backing to the president, but also to the Legislative Council, thus attempting to prevent a deepening of the divide between the parties. However, the same action can also be understood as the Council operating beyond the limits of its powers and mandate. Indeed, Hamas argued that the Central Council had no constitutional authority to extend the president's term, and described the Council as an 'illegitimate entity' and 'an offshoot of bodies whose terms have expired'.⁴⁴

Such disruptions of the national reconciliation process continued for much of 2010, but a breakthrough occurred after Mesh'al met with the chief of Egyptian General Intelligence Service, Omar Suleiman, in Makkah. Suleiman stated that he was not opposed to a Fatah–Hamas agreement that took into account Hamas's reservations related to the Egyptian proposal.⁴⁵ A round of talks was held in Damascus on 24 September 2010 at which Hamas's comments were accepted, with the exception of those relating to security. A further meeting of delegations from the two factions met in Damascus on 9 November 2010, but failed to achieve the desired results.

The changes that the Arab world has witnessed since the beginning of 2011 have helped to push the Palestinian reconciliation process forward. Haniyeh's invitation to Abbas to visit the Gaza Strip, and the latter's acceptance, were positive steps. Furthermore, the signing of a reconciliation agreement between Fatah and Hamas in Cairo on 3 May 2011, after the incorporation of Hamas's comments and the untangling of some of the security knots that had held up the agreement, was an important turning point in the path of Palestinian national unity.

Supplementary elections for the Palestinian National Council

In the summer of 2009, Fatah leaders directed their efforts towards filling the vacant seats in the PLO executive committee, which had lost its legal quorum due to the death or withdrawal of a number of members. Hamas and other factions concerned about reform of the PLO saw this as a retrogressive step, and as symbolising a withdrawal from the reconciliation process, since it took place just as the final touches were being placed on the reconciliation agreement. For Hamas and other factions, Fatah's priority should not have been to fill the committee's vacancies or to make any arrangements aimed at entrenching Fatah's dominance, but rather to stop using the PLO as a tool in the face of opposition.⁴⁶ Fatah, however, took the view that there was no reason to wait for the reconciliation agreement to enter its implementation phase when there was need to make arrangements, even temporary ones, so that the PLO could carry out its basic tasks. They restated that, whatever else there was to say about the PLO, it remained the sole legitimate representative of Palestinians on a regional and international level.

Salim Zanoun, as head of the Palestinian National Council, announced that a special emergency session of the Council would be held on 25 August 2009 at the presidential headquarters in Ramallah. The purpose of this meeting was to elect six members to the executive committee to replace six members who had died, namely: Yasser Arafat, Yasser Amr, Suleiman Najjab, Faisal Hussein, Emile Jarjui and Samir Ghosheh.⁴⁷

The meeting took place, with 325 of over 700 members in attendance, most of whom had been appointed to the Council in 1996, and whose terms on the Council should have expired three years later. At the meeting, the following four members were unanimously appointed: Saeb Erekat (Fatah), Ahmad Majdalani (PSF), Hanna Amira (PPP), and Saleh Rafat (FIDA). An election was held for the remaining two seats, and these were won by Ahmad Qurei (Fatah) with 234 votes, and Hanan Ashrawi (independent) with 182 votes. After the meeting, the PLO's executive committee comprised of eighteen members: Mahmoud Abbas, Saeb Erekat, Faruq Qaddumi, Ahmad Qurei, Tayseer Khalid, Abdul Rahim Mallouh, Ali Ishaq, Abu Ismail, Hanna Amira, Saleh Rafat, Yasser Abed Rabbo, As'ad Abdul Rahman, Riad al-Khudari, Ghassan Shaka, Muhammad Zuhdi Nashashibi, Zakaria al-Agha, Hanan Ashrawi and Ahmad Majdalani.⁴⁸

Some Palestinian factions have used their position in the PLO to play a role on the Palestinian stage that is disproportionate to their actual political or popular strength. For example, FIDA holds barely any seats even in the Legislative Council, yet Yasser Abed Rabbo, a former head of that party, holds the position of secretary of the PLO's executive committee, and has been criticised by many for his negative role in the division between Fatah and Hamas. Moreover, Abbas appointed the secretary-general of FIDA, Saleh Rafat, as head of the military department of the PLO.⁴⁹ The fact that these two key positions were given to leaders from a very small party, and that military leadership was given to a faction that has no involvement in armed struggle or the intifada, reinforces the view that Abbas is not serious about the reform of the PLO. The basis for this view is clear if we consider that the coalition between FIDA, the PPP and the DFLP was unable to win more than two seats in the Legislative Council, yet between them they hold four of the eighteen seats on the PLO's executive committee (including Abed Rabbo). Interestingly, the executive committee then formed a sub-committee, headed by Rabbo himself, to formulate a plan for the development of the PLO and its institutions.⁵⁰

At the conclusion of the 2009 National Council meeting, Mahmoud Abbas stated that 'we can now say that Palestinian legitimacy is in good shape, that the legal quorum is in order, that the PLO is well. Disgraced are those who await the ruin of this organisation.'⁵¹ Clearly, this statement is more wishful thinking than reality. Indeed, Fatah leader, Nabil Amr, indicated that Abbas himself had admitted that he had done nothing with the PLO since he had taken over its leadership. Amr mockingly commented that this was almost too obvious to be worth noting.⁵²

The holding of a National Council meeting in Ramallah under occupation raised a storm of criticism around the reality of the Council's independence and freedom, and its ability to represent the Palestinian people at home and abroad. Further criticisms have also been raised regarding problems associated with the expiry of its members' terms as representatives, and the absence of major factions such as Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

Conclusion

After nearly forty years of almost exclusive leadership of the Palestinian struggle, the leadership of the PLO (which also led Fatah and the

Palestinian Authority) were not interested in, let alone willing to accommodate, a rotation of power – especially to parties that differed with them in terms of ideology, strategy and priorities for national action, as is the case with the Islamist movements.

There is no doubt that the struggle between Fatah and Hamas in 2006 and 2007 was one cause of the PLO's failed reform process. This struggle on its own, however, cannot take all the blame. The weakening and marginalisation of the PLO is strongly linked to the Oslo Accords, negotiations with Israel, and Palestinian leaders' penchant for supporting charismatic leaders rather than for developing strong institutions. Had the PLO been strong enough to accommodate the various components of the Palestinian people, to act as an umbrella for all of the factions and their capacities, the problems of insecurity and lawlessness, as well as the 'coup' facing legitimate institutions, would have been more easily managed.

However, despite the fact that the terms of office of the PLO's National Council, Central Council and its executive committee expired in 1999, the latter two bodies have continued to convene. This has conferred a kind of semi-legitimacy on the PLO's leadership, and its support for the government in Ramallah, as well as its opposition to Hamas and the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip. The Central Council and executive committee have given President Abbas the authority to act regardless of the fact that many see the legal and constitutional validity of both bodies as having expanded beyond their respective mandates, and as having encroached on the powers of the Legislative Council where Hamas controls a large majority of seats.

As for Hamas, it has continued to emphasise the necessity of rebuilding the PLO on a sound basis to ensure broad participation, political pluralism, and free elections as a basis for membership of the Palestinian National Council, whenever and wherever this is possible. Hamas has refused to recognise the PLO as the sole legitimate representative in its current form, especially since Hamas is not currently represented in it, and given its institutional, ideological and political criticisms of the PLO. The Palestinian Islamic Jihad has a similar position.

Several agreements between Fatah, Hamas and other factions have emphasised the need for reforming the PLO. These include the 2005 Cairo Declaration, the 2006 Prisoners' Document, the 2007 Mecca Agreement and the 2011 Egyptian Paper on national reconciliation. However, much effort, determination and dedication is still required to transform what has been agreed on paper into implementation on the ground.

Endnotes

- 1 *Addustur*, Amman, 3 August 2005.
- 2 Officially known as the Quartet on the Middle East, this body includes the UN, the USA, the EU, and Russia.
- 3 See Saleh (2007).
- 4 *Al-Hayat*, London, 29 March 2006.
- 5 See, for example, *Al-Quds Al-Arabi* (Palestine), 18 April 2006; and *al-Hayat*, 9 July 2006.
- 6 *Al-Hayat*, 11 November 2006; and *Asharq Al Awsat*, London, 22 December 2006.
- 7 Saleh (2007: 43).
- 8 For the full document, see http://www.mideastweb.org/prisoners_letter.htm. The five prisoners who wrote the document were: Marwan Barghouti (Fatah Secretary in the West Bank and PLC member); Sheikh Abdul Khaliq al-Natsheh (a prominent Hamas leader); Sheikh Bassam al-Sa'di (from the Palestinian Islamic Jihad); 'Abdul Rahim Mallouh (deputy secretary-general of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and member of the PLO executive committee); and Mustafa Badarneh (Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine).
- 9 See: Saleh and Saad (2008: 364); on the reactions of the various parties to the document, see: *Al-Hayat*, 12 May 2006; *Assafir*, Beirut, 12 May 2006; and the full text in *Assafir* 27 May 2006.
- 10 Saleh and Saad (2009: 122).
- 11 See Saleh (2008: 34–35).
- 12 See Shaker Jawhari, Dahlan, 'The Path to Succeeding Mahmoud Abbas', *Akhbaruna*, 11 April 2007 (Available online at <http://www.akhbaruna.com/node/3760>); see also *Al-Watan*, Abha (Saudi Arabia), 3 March 2007.
- 13 See Saleh (2008: 53).
- 14 See, for example, reports about Khaled Mesh'al's press conference in Doha, reported in *al-Wattan* (Qatar) and *al-Hayat* on 22 July 2007.
- 15 See Saleh (2008: 50).
- 16 See www.arabs48.com, 14 June 2007; *Al-Hayat*, 15 June 2007.
- 17 *Al-Hayat*, 20 July 2007.
- 18 See *al-Wattan* (Qatar), and *Al-Hayat*, 22 July 2007.
- 19 See *Al-Hayat Al-Jadida* (Ramallah), and *Al-Quds Al-Arabi* (London), 3 September 2007.
- 20 *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, 22 July 2008.
- 21 *Al Khaleej*, (Sharjah) 7 September 2008.
- 22 *Al-Hayat*, 24 March 2008.
- 23 *Okaz* (Jeddah), 30 September 2008.
- 24 *Al-Hayat*, 9 September 2008.
- 25 *Annahar* (Beirut), 13 November 2008.
- 26 *Al-Haqa'iq* (London) 15 March 2008. Available online at <http://www.alhaqaeq.net/?rqid=9&secid=3&art=84643>
- 27 *Al-Sharq* (Doha) 10 August 2008; and *Al-Hayat* 17 October 2008.
- 28 *Al-Hayat*, 17 October 2008.
- 29 Quds Press International News Agency (London), 23 November 2008.
- 30 Mesh'al made this announcement at the 'Gaza has Triumphed' festival held in Doha on 28 January 2009; see *Filastin*, 29 January 2009.
- 31 Statement of Saeb Erekat, *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, 30 January 2009.

- 32 Statement by Hussein al-Sheikh in *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 30 January 2009.
- 33 Statement by Azzam Al-Ahmad on Al Jazeera.net, 29 January 2009.
- 34 From a statement by the Palestinian National Council, *Al-Hayat al-Jadida*, 1 February 2009.
- 35 *Al-Hayat*, 4 February 2009.
- 36 *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 3 February 2009.
- 37 For more information about the Egyptian proposal, see Mahmoud Abdou, 'Disunity in Palestine: Its history and implications for the peace process' *Peace and Conflict Monitor*, 18 April 2013 (available online), and 'The Main Terms of the Palestinian Conciliation Agreement', *Al-Hayat*, 29 April 2011.
- 38 WAFA Palestinian News Agency, 23 October 2009.
- 39 Reuters, 25 October 2010.
- 40 *Al-Ahram* (Cairo), 30 October 2010.
- 41 *Al-Hayat*, 13 November 2009.
- 42 On the support of the Executive Committee, see: *Al-Hayat al-Jadida*, 6 November 2009; on the support of the Fatah Revolutionary Council, see: *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, 9 November 2009; on US, Israeli, Egyptian and Jordanian support, see *Al-Mustaqbal* (Beirut) 6 November 2009.
- 43 *Al-Hayat*, 17 December 2009.
- 44 See, for example, the statement by Fawzi Barhoum, *Filastin*, 17 December 2009; and the statement by Musa Abu Marzouk, *al-Sabeel* (Amman), 26 December 2009.
- 45 *Al-Hayat*, 6 October 2010.
- 46 On the position of Hamas, see the statement by Sami Abu Zuhri in *al-Khalij*, 18 August 2009; and the statement of the Palestinian government in Gaza, on the Palestinian Information Center website, 18 August 2009; as well as the statement made by Hamas in Okaz on 22 August 2009.
- 47 *Al-Hayat*, 25 August 2009.
- 48 WAFA Palestinian News Agency, 26 August 2009; see also *Al-Hayat* and *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 27 August 2009.
- 49 *Al-Sharq*, Doha, 27 August 2008.
- 50 It is interesting to note that the PLO's executive committee formed a committee of its own, chaired by Rabbo, to develop a plan for the reform of the PLO and its institutions; see *Al-Khalij*, 29 August 2009.
- 51 WAFA Palestinian News Agency, 26 August 2009.
- 52 *Al-Ghad* (Amman), 28 August 2009.

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PART I



CHAPTER 1

The PLO's journey from 1964 to 2006: An overview

Shafiq al-Hout

Whether we are working to reclaim and resuscitate the PLO, or to establish a new organisation with a new charter and structure – or, indeed, to devise any other manner by which we as Palestinians might be represented, it is appropriate to briefly review the history of the PLO and consider its present situation. Before we delve into our visions for the future of the PLO, it is vital that we extract the lessons that can be learned from our past.

We all agree that the Palestinian struggle has faced a myriad of challenges, three of which are worth highlighting at the outset: (i) the withdrawal of all forms of military support by the Arab states in the wake of the October 1973 war, and the refocusing of efforts on negotiating a peaceful settlement; (ii) the elimination of the option of a cross-border war of liberation after the war in Lebanon in 1982; and (iii) the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, with the repercussions that this has had for Arabs in general, and Palestinians in particular.

It is clear that the local, regional and international dimensions of the political stage on which the Palestinian cause now stands contrast strongly with those that were in place when the PLO was founded at the Intercontinental Hotel in Jerusalem, between 28 May and 2 June 1964. Where has our journey taken us?

In my opinion, the establishment of the PLO was the first strategic Arab–Palestinian response to the Nakba of 1948. I have long praised the establishment of the PLO as the Palestinian people's most important achievement, and I seize this opportunity to again honour and remember its founder Ahmad al-Shuqayri. It was al-Shuqayri who drafted the articles of what we then referred to as the Pan-Arab Palestinian Charter. In 1969, at the behest of Fatah and other Palestinian military factions, the name of the charter was changed to the National Charter. Al-Shuqayri also played a central role in drafting the PLO's

internal charter and by-laws, and he helped establish the Palestine National Fund, as well as centres for research and planning. Above all, he managed to amalgamate Palestinian soldiers serving in various Arab armies into the nucleus of the Palestinian National Liberation Army, and the PLO opened representative offices in a number of Arab and foreign countries during his era.

After the defeat suffered in the Six-Day War in 1967, and al-Shuqayri's ensuing resignation, the PLO's hands were tied by a temporary command that lacked any real leadership. Then, in the wake of the Battle of Karamah, and during the fifth meeting of the Palestinian National Council in March 1968, Abu Ammar was elected as head of the PLO.¹ Arafat's reign was witness to some of the organisation's brightest accomplishments and its most bitter defeats. His era saw the PLO transform the stereotype of Palestinians from refugees to freedom fighters. During his time, Palestinians' dignity was restored among Arabs, and the PLO served as a vessel for safeguarding Palestinian heritage and civilisation. More importantly, the PLO imposed a framework on the Palestinian struggle and established itself as the legitimate representative and mouthpiece of the Palestinian people.

In 1974, ten years after the establishment of the PLO – and through strident popular resistance, the PLO clinched full membership status within the Arab League during the League's summit in Rabat. During the same year – and as a consequence of the 1973 October War – the PLO made its debut at the UN when it was given observer status in the General Assembly on 22 November 1974.² This opened the door to increased international recognition. In 1976, the PLO became a member of the Non-Aligned Movement, and allied itself to other international blocs and organisations. Furthermore, new embassies and representative offices were opened around the world and the Palestinian flag flew proudly above them all.

I assure you that I still count myself as being among those who are working to reclaim and revive the PLO, in spite of the formidable difficulties and complications involved in this. Leaving aside other possible options and alternatives for the moment, I would like to first examine what can be described as the organisation's state of affairs as of 2006. Our present situation can be traced back to 9 September 1993 – the day on which Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin laid the groundwork for the Oslo Accords. While, the PLO had been subject to successive power struggles and internal rifts since its inception, the organisation had remained largely intact. Yet the blow dealt to the PLO

on that ominous day was irrevocable. 'Who would have imagined that the fortress would fall from within?' remarked Abba Eban commenting on the schism that struck the PLO.

The Gaza–Jericho Agreement (later known as the Oslo Accords) expedited the downfall of our beloved fortress, and transformed the PLO from an organisation that championed national liberation into one mired in a series of political, national and pan-Arab concessions. This saga continues, and the concessions made to date threaten to compromise the most basic ambitions of the Palestinian people, including their right to self-determination.

On the one hand, in the name of the PLO, we renounced so-called violence and terrorism, and vowed to 'chastise transgressors' who would not follow our example. We thereby forfeited our association with the armed struggle. On the other hand, we failed to demand that Israel recognise the Fourth Geneva Convention, and other international declarations that govern the relationship between occupying forces and occupied peoples and territories. Moreover, we agreed that the Palestinian Authority would relinquish any form of authority in foreign affairs, thereby giving up our right to embassies, consulates or any other missions or representative offices abroad. We thus agreed to confine the PLO's external activities to conducting negotiations and signing agreements in a narrow range of areas with governments and organisations on behalf of the Palestinian Authority. In other words, after stripping the Palestinian Authority of any effective tools with which it might conduct its foreign affairs, Israel appointed the PLO as an intermediary for the Palestinian Authority, and stringently limited the PLO's room to manoeuvre, thus neatly preventing Palestine from bearing any resemblance to a real nation state.

Israel is obviously concerned strictly with the future of the Palestinian Authority, and has no interest in strengthening the PLO. Having sealed the latter's fate via the Oslo Accords, Israel would like to see the PLO dissolved after it serves its final purpose, namely: signing a political agreement, the terms of which are to be dictated by the Israelis.

In my view, the last nail was hammered into the PLO's coffin when the Palestinian leadership heeded directives from the Zionist–American alliance to amend the National Charter, and ordered the Charter's suspension at a humiliating ceremony in Gaza attended by Bill Clinton. On that day, the fortress truly crumbled.

Of the thirty-three articles in the National Charter, the last three are merely organisational clauses and have no political bearing or content.

The other thirty articles carry unequivocal political implications, which negate Arafat's assurances to Rabin, and contradict the Oslo Accords, as well as all the exchanges with Israel that have ensued. Consequently, twenty-seven out of thirty articles (that is, ninety per cent of the Charter) had to be reformulated – thus effectively rendering the existing Charter obsolete.

For instance, the Charter's opening article reads as follows: 'Palestine is the homeland of the Arab Palestinian people; it is an indivisible part of the greater Arab homeland, and the Palestinian people are an integral part of the Arab nation.' This directly contradicts Arafat's message to Rabin, and the Oslo Accords, because the Palestine indicated here refers to the entire area held under the British mandate of Palestine.

The second part of the first article ordains these territories to be a single, indivisible unit. Thus, under the Oslo Accords, a new definition is needed for an alternative Palestinian homeland with the new borders it prescribes. Indeed, under the Accords, the issue of a 'homeland', in the sense of a nation state and its borders, remains in limbo, having been postponed to 'final-status' negotiations. In other words, the Accords make it impossible for parties to assign a predetermined text to an undefined term before the conclusion of the negotiations process. Unsurprisingly, the text of the oath taken by Arafat on the day he was inaugurated as the first elected president of the Palestinian Authority was extremely vague and loose: 'I swear by Allah Almighty to be loyal to the homeland, and to preserve the constitution and uphold the law, to preserve the interests of the Palestinian people and the sanctity of their territories, and to accomplish the Palestinian people's national hopes and aspirations.'

To which homeland did Arafat's oath refer, and where are its borders? Did it refer to the Palestinian homeland in a historic sense or the homeland sketched in the maps of UN Resolution 181 of 1949? Did it perhaps denote the homeland cited in the 1988 Palestinian Declaration of Independence? And does 'the sanctity of its territories' include or exclude Israeli settlements, the fate of which are also to be determined only during final-status negotiations?

To take another example, the third article of the National Charter reads: 'The Palestinian Arab people possess the right to their homeland, and to self-determination after the completion of the liberation of their country in accordance with their wishes, and entirely of their own accord and will.' This article is also contradicted by the Oslo Accords because, although the homeland cited in the text refers to all of Palestine, the

Accords concede no rights to the Palestinian people to claim any part of their territories whatsoever, nor any right to self-determination. This, too, has been postponed until final-status negotiations.

Similar contradictions affect most of the remaining clauses, including eleven articles that are packed with rhetoric designed to promote the liberation of Palestine.

By outlining the history and contemporary reality of the PLO, I invite us to explore what kind of liberation organisation the PLO is. Once again, remember that the contemporary political and organisational scene bears no resemblance to that which prevailed in 1974. In addition to the political turning points already referenced, two Islamist organisations, Hamas and the Islamic Jihad, have joined the stage, the second intifada has been launched, and our brother Abu Ammar has passed away. Furthermore, and this is something that many PLO leaders refuse to acknowledge, the Palestinian people have changed too. Individuals born around the time of the founding of the PLO are in their early fifties, and are in line for leading positions in the organisations that represent the Palestinian struggle. However, some founding members of the PLO have yet to relinquish their positions and make way for the new generation – gimmicks like hair-dye will never restore youth to the old guard, nor breathe life into an aging organisation.

Even more importantly, we must confront the pressing question: what next?

First and foremost, we must arrive at a common political language. The journey undertaken by the organisations and factions within our struggle has been protracted, and various complexities surround both our cause and the nationalist project. For this reason, ambiguity and uncertainty dominates much of our political and organisational terminology, making it impossible for us to understand one another properly.

When we speak of the PLO, for instance, which organisation are we actually referring to? Is it the one founded on the Pan-Arab Charter or the National Charter? Or is it the present organisation, which abides by no charter? Similarly, when we speak of a 'homeland', what are we referring to exactly? The historic homeland, or the one occupied in 1967? And when we talk of 'the people', do we mean those residing in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, or do we include Palestinians living in Israel, in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and in the diaspora? Why do we stress the 'right of return' above the 'right to liberation and self-determination'?

Even allusions to 'national or legitimate rights' carry multiple connotations. The same words carry one meaning when used by a militant from Hamas or Fatah, for example, and another when used by a member of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine. It is thus imperative that we agree on a common language as we restart our march under the banner of a nationalist movement that is capable of leading the struggle in this new century.

In my view, Palestinians require better representation. This could be achieved either by reforming and revitalising the PLO, or by building a new body that is capable of keeping abreast of the latest developments, recognising political pluralism, as well as rotating leadership responsibilities within a comprehensive national framework, excluding no one, and serving as the sole reference point for national decision-making.

Personally, while I remain open to other views, I am in favour of reclaiming the PLO for the following reasons:

- I believe that the continuity of the struggle is important, and that the gains made so far can be built upon. In this regard, the banner of the PLO remains significant in the Palestinian collective consciousness – particularly among those in the diaspora.
- The PLO, despite its present condition, has a solid track record in the Arab world and internationally. Any attempt to establish a new organisation would almost certainly have negative repercussions, especially in the present context of US domination.
- With the exception of Hamas and the Islamic Jihad – the two Islamic organisations that have come to the forefront since the establishment of the PLO – all other factions within the revolution have worked within the PLO's ambit for decades. The PLO has gained priceless experience that could help it to bring about the necessary changes. Regarding the National Charter's suspended articles, I argue that it is both possible and essential for us to agree on a new charter, one that takes into account the recent developments, and fits seamlessly with the present conditions of the Palestinian cause.

It is no secret that bets have been placed on various scenarios pertaining to Palestinian politics under Abu Mazen (Mahmoud Abbas), who has chaired the PLO since November 2004, and has been president of the Palestinian National Authority since January 2005. Some are deluded by dreams of a peaceful settlement, while others are fully

aware that no such solution is imminent. Either way, any solution that excludes the minimum demands of the Palestinian people – such as the establishment of a Palestinian state over the territories occupied by Israel in 1967, with Jerusalem as its capital; the dismantling of Israeli settlements; and the return of Palestinian refugees as per UN Resolution 194 – will be unanimously rejected. As we wait for this old/new negotiations approach to give birth to an acceptable solution, we must mobilise our people, prepare them to steadfastly continue their resistance, and brace themselves for the worst.

It follows that we must reorganise our struggle, starting from inside our own Palestinian organisations, and beginning with Fatah. We must, in this process, redefine relations among all Palestinian groups and factions, and aim to establish a united front, or an overarching framework, that the national movement as a whole can view as indispensable, whether under the banner of the PLO or that of a new structure.

Finally, on the issue of our people in the diaspora, and their right to representation, I would first like to caution against classifications that divide the Palestinian people based on where they live. Thus, while I acknowledge that different interest groups have different priorities for purely practical reasons, it is important to affirm that, at a national level, the Palestinian people are a single indivisible entity, and that we share common goals. In my view, the priorities of our people in the diaspora can be summarised as follows:

- To emphasise their sacred and non-negotiable right of return, as well as their rights to self-determination, sovereignty, and an independent state with Jerusalem as its capital.
- To reject all attempts to divide and disenfranchise the Palestinian people, or to deny their identity by forced nationalisation and displacement.
- To reaffirm that the PLO is the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.
- To accept political pluralism and entrench the spirit of democracy, while recognising that the Palestinian National Council – which represents Palestinians worldwide – holds the sole mandate for making decisions that impact on the supreme national interests of the people and the homeland.
- To use elections – wherever possible – to elect members of the Palestinian National Council; and when elections are not feasible, to ensure that there is discussion and agreement among the main Palestinian factions.

- To end the exploitation of Palestinian refugees and the discrimination they suffer.

These are crucial objectives, but as far as a mechanism for achieving them is concerned, we are confronted with a complex predicament rooted in geographical, political and regional difficulties. Perhaps the only route to a viable solution has to begin by inviting all Palestinian forces, factions and national figures to form a preparatory committee. This body could lay down a new vision for the future of the PLO in light of the documents, studies and suggestions at hand. This is the central task facing our masses and our institutions, and it must be completed before we can truly set sail for what can be referred to as the post-Arafat era.

Endnotes

- 1 Abu Ammar was the nom de guerre adopted by Yasser Arafat in the early years of his career as a guerilla soldier.
- 2 In 2012, Palestine was given the status of an 'observer state'.

CHAPTER 2

The rise of Palestinian national consciousness in the PLO

Nafez Abu Hasna

After Hamas won the elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council held in January 2006, several PLO factions decided not to participate in the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority because Hamas refused to acknowledge the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. Hamas indicated that it was willing to forge a coalition government, but insisted that the PLO be rebuilt before it could be considered to legitimately represent all Palestinians. Hamas probably saw the PLO factions' refusal as a strategy aimed at undermining their authority and ability to manoeuvre.

Whether this was the case or not, Hamas's growing popularity intensified the PLO's efforts to resuscitate itself after years of inaction. These efforts increased markedly after the 2006 elections, and led to a rekindling of intra-Palestinian dialogue regarding the PLO and its supposed role. Interestingly, debates about the PLO's role have raged throughout the life of the organisation, and the organisation has seldom succeeded in really uniting Palestinians or in symbolising the so-called home of the Palestinian psyche. Several reasons can be advanced for this, but in this chapter I focus on tracking Palestinian national consciousness within the organisation, and the changing nature of this consciousness during the various phases of its development. That is, I endeavour to answer two questions: is the PLO a national necessity for Palestinians; and, if so, what sort of a liberation organisation should it be?

Inception

Even now, there are those who argue that the PLO was born out of an official decision taken by the Arab states. This view stresses the fact that a decision taken by the first Arab League summit in Cairo in 1964 authorised the late Ahmad al-Shuqayri to call on Palestinians to organise their affairs. Implicit here is the notion that the formation

of the PLO arose less from an internal Palestinian response or need, and more from the desire of the Arab regimes to: (i) rid themselves of the burden of the Palestinian issue, and (ii) create an organisational framework that excluded the revolutionary movements that had begun to crystallise in Palestinian circles in the late 1950s.

This perspective deliberately ignores the reality of Palestinian aspirations related to crafting a national entity (as expressed by Hajj Amin al-Husayni, Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, on the eve of the Nakba) and the establishment of the All-Palestine Government (which was eventually undermined by various Arab regimes). This view also disregards the fact that the Arab League did not instruct al-Shuqayri to establish the PLO, but merely to call Palestinians together. In fact, the mandate given to al-Shuqayri was to form an organisation along the lines of the All-Palestine Government, which could occupy Palestine's seat in the Arab League but remain devoid of any real or effective role.

Through his contacts, al-Shuqayri attempted to identify the most important Palestinian aspirations, to manifest these in an organisation, and to present a first executive committee to the second Arab League summit in September 1964. Far from presenting a puppet body, al-Shuqayri confronted the League with the PLO. From the start, the PLO elicited little approval from Arab countries. Instead, the organisation fell foul of political polarisations and alliances that are perhaps better left unexplained here.

In fact, in the early 1960s, a debate took place among various Arab nations regarding Palestine, and several different visions emerged. If truth be told, some genuinely hoped for the rise of a Palestinian entity for various reasons, possibly including a desire to devolve responsibility for the Palestinian cause. But even if we accept that the PLO was brought into being partly as a result of an official Arab League decision, it must be acknowledged that this was at least equalled by the Palestinians' own ambition to establish an independent Palestinian entity, despite opposition from official Arab and Islamic quarters.

The Palestinian yearning for such an entity reflected a wish to counter the colonial Zionist presence in Palestinian territories, and to respond to the marginalisation and exile forced on the Palestinian people throughout the 1950s. This was especially true after the undermining of the All-Palestine Government, and in the context of the collapse of the union between Egypt and Syria in 1961, as well as the rising scepticism about the Arab League's positions on Palestine.

Researchers probing this issue further will find evidence that the triumph of the Algerian revolution – led by the National Liberation Front, and backed by the National Liberation Army, which received substantial support from the Arab world – also helped to catalyse Palestinian national sentiment. In addition, statements and positions taken by Arab leaders, especially Egyptian president, Gamal Abdel Nasser, who admitted that no Arab leader had a plan for liberating Palestine,¹ played a role in motivating Palestinians to seek a national political body of their own.

Acknowledging the Palestinian people's ambitions does not, however, mean that Palestinians accepted the creation of the PLO unreservedly. Four different positions dominated Palestinian opinion towards the organisation.

The first welcomed the formation of the PLO, and was evident in the powerful popular support for the organisation in the Egyptian-administered Gaza Strip. Al-Shuqayri was greeted with cheers and celebrations, as were soldiers of the Palestine Liberation Army when they were seen training. The pan-Arab blocs aligned with Egypt also supported the PLO. This was clear in the positions taken by supporters of Nasserism (including segments of the Arab Nationalist Movement), and by other movements that supported Nasser's policies (such as the Palestine Liberation Front then led by Shafiq al-Hout). Palestinians who supported the PLO saw the organisation as a means of achieving liberation and the return of their homeland, while the pan-Arab groups would not dare to cast doubt on any project supported by Nasser.

The second position was a more neutral or cautious one. It was shared by pan-Arab Ba'athists and segments of the Arab Nationalist Movement on the one hand, and by what can be referred to as segments of the Jordan Party (made up of dignitaries from both sides of the Jordan River) on the other. Pan-Arab nationalists stringently rejected 'independent national sentiment, opposed Arab governments, and called for broad-based popular action as a stepping stone to the establishment of the PLO'.² As for the Jordan Party, its positions were based on the Jordanian regime's position on the PLO, and fuelled by passionate support for the Kingdom of Jordan.

The third position opposed the formation of the PLO, considering the organisation to be the illegitimate offspring of the Arab states. This position perceived the PLO as a threat to the newly formed Palestinian revolutionary movement and its underground elements, namely Fatah and the Palestine Liberation Front. Supporters of this position argued

that Nasser's support for the PLO was a ploy to mask a conspiracy against them and other movements that shared the same revolutionary ideology.³

The fourth position opposed the PLO even more strongly. Paradoxically, some of those who adopted this position included both the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj Amin al-Husayni, and Jordan Party hardliners. The Mufti considered the PLO to be detrimental to the Palestinian national struggle, believing it would be a tool for negotiations with the Zionists if the Arab governments chose to wash their hands of the Palestinian cause and resort to negotiations.⁴ Meanwhile, some Jordan Party 'hardliners'⁵ saw the PLO as part of a conspiracy against the unity of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

Two further observations are important here. The first is the absence of an Islamic tendency, which perhaps can be explained by the fact that this was 'in its weakest state, hounded and preoccupied with self-preservation, unable to formulate a clear and mature political opinion on the establishment of the PLO. Even if Islamists had managed to devise a political position at this point, it is unlikely that they would have found a medium through which to communicate it, and even less likely that they would have been able to garner any real support'.⁶ The second observation is that more than one Palestinian who was present at the time has indicated that much of the political intransigence about the birth of the PLO can be attributed to political tactics and expediency. This observation is all the more apt in light of the fact that certain Palestinian factions that initially opposed the PLO adjusted their positions when they saw the PLO diligently forming and training units of the Palestine Liberation Army. These shifts become clearer later on, but from the early stages, Palestinian attitudes towards the PLO were confused, suspicious and divided. While some viewed the organisation as an instrument of liberation, others feared it might be part of a conspiracy against the national cause.

From inception to the second Nakba

The period of just over two years between the establishment of the PLO and the second Nakba in 1967 was not long enough for the organisation to confidently secure its presence in the Palestinian arena. Despite major achievements – the formation of the Palestine Liberation Army, and the training programmes created for the army's units in the Gaza Strip, Syria and Iraq – the PLO was distracted by the intense polarisation that was happening in the Arab world at that time. Indeed,

the PLO lost track of the fact that at least two other Palestinian factions had also taken up arms – albeit in a more limited way. Thus, the PLO fell behind in relation to its liberation agenda, and compromised the main purpose for which it was established.

Unfortunately, the PLO was formed at a time of heightened infighting among Arabs, and, even more unfortunately, the organisation – often despite the will of its leaders – found itself mired in many of these disputes. Consequently, by merely invoking the need to protect the Palestinian people, the PLO could find itself accused of planning military coups and conspiracies. Other contributors to this volume also trace the history of the PLO, so I will provide just one example of this. Al-Shuqayri criticised the massacre of unarmed Palestinians by the Israeli army at as-Samu in 1965 and 1966, and reiterated the need to mobilise the Palestine Liberation Army in all territories that harboured Palestinians. Al-Shuqayri was viciously condemned for this statement, and shortly thereafter the PLO was implicated in an alleged plot to overthrow the Jordanian regime. Indeed, some saw al-Shuqayri's boldness and eloquent speeches as a liability, and as responsible for plunging the PLO into the centre of internal Arab strife. Al-Shuqayri was eventually punished for his bold attitude during the famous Khartoum conference. In my view, blaming al-Shuqayri for the PLO's unenviable position in relation to Arab infighting is completely unfounded. The reality is that, during this time, the PLO obtained more support from China than from all the Arab regimes combined.

Meanwhile, among Palestinians, the position of the PLO remained almost unchanged during this period; the organisation found little support or shelter among the population, and many Palestinians felt that its existence changed little. One could argue that the PLO was a step away from following in the footsteps of the All-Palestine Government.

However, during the Six Day War (from 5 to 10 June 1967), units of the Palestine Liberation Army joined the battle wherever they were situated, and fought with particular ferocity in the Gaza Strip. The defeat of Arab forces in this war had many repercussions, and marked the start of a new era for the PLO. Some of the organisation's units in the Gaza Strip were co-opted into the Popular Liberation Forces,⁷ and began adopting the slogans of martyrdom. These forces launched follow-up combat activities before other Palestinian factions, which were still dazed by the crushing defeat they had suffered.

The PLO then sought an alliance with Fatah – the main armed Palestinian faction at the time – and tried to reach similar understandings with

militant factions belonging to the Arab Nationalist Movement. However, these efforts failed to bear fruit, with al-Shuqayri coming under fire from Arab regimes, and losing Egyptian sponsorship. Egypt used well-known journalist Mohamed Hassanein Heikal to attack al-Shuqayri, blaming his speeches for the 1967 defeat. Meanwhile, several other Arab regimes put pressure on members of the PLO's executive committee to sign a document impeaching the PLO chairperson. Under growing pressure from both Arab regimes and Palestinian factions that were determined to bring about his downfall, al-Shuqayri submitted his resignation to the Palestinian people, and has been reported as saying: 'I leave the wagon as it has begun to plunge, and it will continue falling bit by bit to its end.'

There was more than one reason for al-Shuqayri's downfall, however. Perhaps the most important of these was the position he took during the 1967 Arab League summit in Khartoum, which was convened after the Six-Day War. Al-Shuqayri insisted on four 'NOs' (three of which found their way into the final resolution) and insisted that not even Nasser was authorised to speak on behalf of the Palestinian people.⁸ I imagine that the Arab establishment decided to kill two birds with one stone at this point, that is: blame a patsy for the 1967 defeat while declaring, 'we did not wish this for you'.

More important, however, was the fact that a relentless attack was launched against al-Shuqayri and the PLO by various Palestinian factions led by Fatah. Although it is difficult to imagine that a movement that considered itself the embodiment of Palestinian nationalism would carry out the agenda of an Arab axis or an Arab regime, it is reasonable to assume that Fatah had its own reasons for jumping on the bandwagon and condemning al-Shuqayri. At that time, support for Fatah was growing, and its activities drew admiration from Palestinians and other Arab nations, so there was little to prevent it from linking its early revolutionary legitimacy with another legitimate forum that it claimed it wanted to revolutionise. The truth of the matter is that an internal debate took place within Fatah on whether to infiltrate the PLO as a stepping-stone to taking over the organisation, and some Fatah members refused to adopt this strategy.

In any event, the PLO was left languishing with a feeble interim leadership for a short time before falling smoothly into the lap of various revolutionary armed factions led by Fatah, which, at the time, was riding high on its marvellous achievements during the Battle of Karameh. After this, the PLO became the epicentre of the Palestinian liberation movement for more than two decades.

The legitimate home of Palestinian psyche, 1968 to 1974

In the brief period between 1968 and 1969, major shifts occurred in the PLO's structure, hierarchy and programme. During the fourth meeting of the Palestinian National Council in 1968, the PLO scrapped its Pan-Arab Charter, replacing it with the National Charter. At the same time, the 'factional quota' became a major factor in the dynamics within the Council. At the next meeting, the factions achieved domination in the organisation, and Yasser Arafat, then Fatah's official spokesperson, emerged as the PLO's new chairperson.

The transition from the Pan-Arab to the National Charter was no mere routine procedure or minor transformation. One cannot overemphasise the significance of the setback that struck the collective Arab project in the wake of the 1967 defeat. However, it is equally important to acknowledge that the various Palestinian factions – now firmly embedded in the PLO – were keen to shed the image that had long been associated with other Arab regimes, and to turn the PLO into a Palestinian organisation, albeit one that remained mindful of the Arab dimension of the Palestinian issue. In other words, the adoption of the National Charter was a direct reflection of the views and programme of the largest armed Palestinian group, Fatah.

The PLO's 'nationalist' phase also began at this time, and marked a clash, not so much with pan-Arab ideology as with pan-Arab notions regarding the struggle, the means for its management and its strategic outcomes. The PLO set itself on a collision course with various Arab regimes at different levels, and was at loggerheads with all those opposing the organisation's newfound nationalist character.

The organisation now marketed itself as a reflection of the will of the Palestinian people, based on the factions within the organisation. Within this identity, the PLO was forced to acknowledge the tension between adhering to its revolutionary aims and paying allegiance to those Arab states that offered it some support. This led to internal battles, and then to the signing of accords with Lebanon and Jordan in 1969 and 1970 respectively. However, these accords did not lead to the transformation of the organisation. Rather, the very nature of its component parts led the PLO to adopt an increasingly revolutionary stance. Subsequent clashes with Lebanon and Jordan – despite the different reasons and circumstances surrounding these, and the agreements and transformations that followed – consolidated the PLO's status as a regional Palestinian force to be reckoned with.

Similarly, in the Palestinian consciousness, the PLO began to be seen as an instrument of self-defence and national liberation, designed to restore Palestine's position on the map, and to wage war against its occupants and transgressors.

For a combination of reasons, related to the situation both inside and outside the Palestinian arena, the PLO fell short of transforming itself into a national liberation front, and commanding a national liberation army. In fact, the PLO came under unwelcome geo political pressures that required it to hammer its way through political bedrock in order to strengthen the position of soldiers recruited into its armed factions. Nevertheless, the organisation succeeded in branding itself as a national icon and, as the epicentre around which revolutionary forces could congregate under the banner of Palestinian liberation.

Although many people have difficulty drawing a defining line between the two, it would be unwise to overlook the nature of the relationship between Fatah and the PLO, or the effect that this relationship has had on the PLO's structure and programmes. My concern is not with the problems caused by the blurring of this boundary, but to point out that its blurring was a strong indication of the nature of public consciousness and awareness about the PLO. Ordinary Palestinians did not fully comprehend the nature of the apparatus established to facilitate discussions between armed groups. They simply remained loyal to factions that had taken up arms against Israel, and tended to see these as being equivalent to the PLO.

The PLO thus served as a home for the Palestinian psyche, and worked hard to market itself as the sole legitimate representative and caretaker of the Palestinian people. In reality, however, the PLO found its hands tied, even in regions where Palestinians were heavily represented. Palestinians carrying Jordanian citizenship, for example, were prevented from raising their voices in support of the PLO. This sometimes extended even to segments of the Palestinian population in the West Bank; and most of the Palestinians who had taken refuge in countries in the Arabian Gulf tended to deny or avoid any affiliation with the PLO for fear of their livelihoods. In other regions, support for the PLO was linked to the quality of the relations between the PLO and the regime under which Palestinian expatriates found themselves. Lebanon seemed to be the one exception during this period. There the PLO was able to organise and act publicly, although, in fact, deeper links existed between Lebanon and factions aligned to the PLO, than to the PLO itself.

In any event, many historians see the period between 1969 and 1974 as the PLO's golden era. It was at the end of this period that the Arab League's summit in Rabat issued a communiqué designating the PLO as the only legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. In terms of international recognition, the organisation was given observer status in the United Nations General Assembly after Yasser Arafat addressed the Assembly in 1974. This marked the first time that the UN had granted observer status to a national liberation movement. Ironically, these achievements took place against a backdrop of conflict and polarisation in the Arab world.

Two separate armed clashes in Lebanon and Jordan signalled the unfolding of major transformations in the Arab world. The conflict with Lebanon seemed to end with the inking of the 1969 Cairo Agreement, but it later transpired that this was no more than a brief respite. After fighting broke out in Jordan in September 1970, the PLO lost its broad popular base in that country. It can be argued that the attempt made at this time to establish a United Arab Kingdom, incorporating Palestine, was a manoeuvre to politically eliminate the Palestinian people. Meanwhile, Israel moved to install a supposedly representative Palestinian body in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip with which it could 'negotiate'.

Jordanian and Israeli plans for Palestine fell apart due to:

- Public repudiation from Palestinians, coupled with potent action by Palestinian armed factions, and their revolutionary extensions in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.
- The PLO's ability to leverage public and militant protest, and to express vehement and unequivocal opposition to both projects.
- The absence of broader Arab support for the United Arab Kingdom project.
- Arab and international refusal to recognise or deal with any puppet body installed by the Israelis.

The collapse of these plans reflected the fact that the PLO had become a forceful player in any equation involving the Israelis. Despite its still inauspicious circumstances, the organisation was able to call on wide public support. And the mere notion of Jordan's and Israel's plans rang alarm bells among the higher echelons of the PLO's leadership, who saw these plans as a serious threat to the legitimacy of their organisation's representation of the Palestinian people.

Unfortunately, although the PLO spoke incessantly about the Palestinian people and their demands, the organisation was uncertain about its ability to succeed in such tests of its legitimacy. From this point

on, therefore, the PLO began to concern itself with being recognised as the sole legitimate representative of Palestinians. This made the organisation withdraw (to an extent) from more 'revolutionary' positions, and to attempt to bridge the gap between its own programme and the position of the Arab League, which, based on UN Resolution 242, accepted a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders.

The October 1973 war represented the first joint Arab initiative against Israel. The PLO participated in this war, as it had in 1967, but it was not seen by the other Arab nations as a major player in the conflict. When combat operations ceased, and the political give and take began, an international conference was held in Geneva from which the PLO was excluded, leaving the organisation vulnerable and insecure. Essentially, PLO leaders were forced into making additional compromises in order to secure a foothold for their organisation in any future solution.

This view was based on the belief that a political settlement would follow the war, and that this would result in Israel withdrawing from parts of the occupied Palestinian territories. Naturally, the PLO felt that it should receive and establish its authority in these territories. In hindsight, the PLO's conclusion seems relatively straightforward, but at the time, it created major divisions between Palestinians.

Some argued that: 'The removal of the effects of aggression means [the liberation of] the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and the Arab sectors of Jerusalem; and we have already established that we cannot promote ourselves on the global level without the principle of incremental progress, and without synchronising our stance with the Arab position on the removal of the effects of the aggression.'⁹ Others argued that: 'The 1973 war gave substance to the political maxim that, in today's world, Israel cannot be defeated nor can the Arabs be vanquished. In other words, the struggle will continue unresolved and negotiations will be indispensable to broker a solution somewhere between the Israeli position on the one hand, and the Palestinian and Arab position on the other.'¹⁰

For months, debates continued on a Palestinian political programme later known as the 'Interim Programme'. The view that tended to dominate argued that the October war 'did not result in a victory over the Zionist enemy capable of driving them to relinquish our lands and voluntarily withdraw from them'.¹¹ In spite of heated debates, the programme that emerged was carefully worded, using terminology that was vague enough to satisfy all parties, but in essence it tilted in favour of those supporting a primarily political programme. The twelfth meeting of the Palestinian National Council, convened in June

1974, endorsed the Ten-Point Interim Programme. Divisions soon followed, and the PLO broke apart. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine withdrew from the PLO and began to forge what was later referred to as the opposition camp.

Meanwhile, the Geneva conference came to nothing, and expectations that had been raised about a settlement being negotiated after the war were exposed as illusory. The divisions within the PLO remained very much a reality, however, even though the organisation became the 'sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people' by decree of an Arab League summit.

Once again, the PLO faced many of the accusations that had been levelled against it during its earlier years. Factions outside the organisation accused the PLO of being negligent and irresponsible vis-à-vis the protection of Palestinian national rights, and of failing to reflect the Palestinian people's aspirations. This time, however, the debates did not extend as far as disputing the organisation's basic legitimacy. All parties agreed that the PLO was necessary; the discord focused instead on the development of a working programme that offered a clearly defined mechanism for taking the struggle forward. That is, the disagreements were about the means through which the PLO should achieve its objectives. This led to calls for reform and national dialogue as a means of forging an organisation that mirrored its name and original charter.

Ironically, these debates heightened awareness about the PLO, and gave Palestinian nationalism a major boost. The leaders of the PLO then began to blame the divisions on the interventions of Arab regimes that were vying to assert their grip on Palestinian affairs. Baghdad and Tripoli were accused of backing dissension within Palestinian ranks to secure their own interests. On a practical level, this support was linked to the new Arab axis that came into being in the wake of the October 1973 war. The Arab League endorsed the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people (at the summit in Rabat on 26 October 1974). This gave rise to the slogan of an 'independent national Palestinian decision', which drew popular support from Palestinians who were dissatisfied with the positions taken by the Arab states. These people failed to grasp, however, that the PLO itself had already taken its first steps towards becoming an official regime.

It is worth noting that while the organisation was shrouded in discord, and preoccupied with the war in Lebanon, it still managed to secure a landslide victory in municipal elections held in the West Bank in 1976. But while the PLO consolidated its position as the gateway to

Palestinian nationalism, the organisation's discourse spared no effort to expose the threat of a major plot against the Palestinian people (and the PLO) led by various Arab regimes.

The desire to revive Palestinian nationalism – coupled with growing numbers of professional and other organisations wanting to affiliate to the PLO, as well as thousands of educational scholarships being granted to Palestinian students in Socialist bloc countries – helped to ensure that the PLO occupied a prominent position in popular Palestinian consciousness. This made it difficult to counter, or even undermine, the organisation. Palestinians and their supporters all over the world were now aware of the PLO's presence and influence. Arab and international recognition of the organisation certainly worked in the PLO's favour, but criticism of the PLO then began to centre on the leadership rather than on the organisation as a whole.

A state in limbo: From 1975 to the beginning of the first intifada in 1987

The circumstances of the PLO in Lebanon played a key role in presenting the organisation as a 'state' with special characteristics. After Yasser Arafat's address to the UN, the PLO attracted recognition from a multitude of countries (including some Arab states) that had not previously recognised the organisation. The PLO therefore deployed ambassadors and representative missions to scores of countries, even outnumbering those run by some formally recognised countries. A wide array of affiliated organisations flourished in the PLO's premises in Lebanon. These offices became heavily involved in supporting the activities of unions, grassroots organisations, and professional associations, as well as in establishing economic and social institutions, leading many to see similarities between the organisation and a fully fledged state.

In reality, the PLO used regional and international diplomacy to entrench its legitimacy within the prevailing world order, and achieved important gains in this regard. Standing on firmer ground, the PLO encountered no real difficulties in developing a new political agenda, further distancing itself from the Ten-Point Programme. Interestingly, the organisation managed to regain a degree of unity at this time; not so much as a result of its own agenda, but rather as a result of major regional transformations that were taking place.

Egyptian president, Anwar Sadat, visited Jerusalem and tried to embark on a unilateral peace settlement with Israel, giving rise to

Syrian-Iraqi rapprochement aimed at countering Sadat's move. The PLO convened a National Council meeting in Damascus at which new factions joined the organisation. Parties that had previously broken ranks rejoined, and all members unanimously adopted the plan proposed by the National Council. When compared to the Ten-Point Programme, this plan clearly makes further concessions.

Generally speaking, combat activities carried out by the forces within the PLO declined due to a combination of factors, including the organisation's preoccupation with the war in Lebanon. However, closer scrutiny reveals that political and diplomatic activity was being given precedence over military action. The PLO was no longer the kind of liberation movement it had been before – armed struggle increasingly became a tactic to be deployed in service of the organisation's political strategies.

It is important to note that this reshuffling of the PLO's priorities and *modus operandi* incurred no seriously negative reaction from the Palestinian people. A broad segment of Palestinians convinced themselves that the PLO, as their official representative, must be aware of, and trying to serve, the real interests of all Palestinians. Unfortunately, it soon became apparent that the PLO's political route – especially with regard to reaching a settlement with Israel – was heading nowhere. This gave rise to fresh dissent within the organisation, and led to major divisions once again, only this time they occurred in the wake of an earthquake that rocked the organisation in 1982.

Early warning signals were evident in 1981, when then-Prince Fahd bin Abdul-Aziz of Saudi Arabia¹² made a proposal to settle the Arab-Israeli conflict. The proposal failed to win support from leaders at the Arab League summit held in Fez, Morocco, in September 1982. But when Israel invaded Beirut less than two weeks later, the prince's proposal was adopted and termed the 'Arab Initiative'. The initiative was, however, rejected by a large number of Palestinian forces. Tensions began to rise within Fatah, and the organisation split, with one side resorting to arms. This automatically led to similar fractures in the PLO. Questions surrounding the PLO's legitimacy resurfaced and engulfed not merely its leadership but the entire organisation. Mimicking the discord between nation states, groups opposed to the PLO set up the Palestinian National Salvation Front, which called for the restructuring of the PLO, while other parties urged reform. This confusion left many uncertain about the future viability of the organisation.

The presence of an official opposition proved fertile ground for further bickering over issues of legitimacy and reference, a situation that

continues to scatter and divide Palestinians to this day. This is underlined by the fact that many factions considered the Palestinian National Council meeting convened in Amman in 1984 to be illegitimate, and believed that the Amman Agreement of 11 February 1985 had partially undermined the very legitimacy that the organisation had taken so long to establish. Thus, when the PLO agreed to attend settlement negotiations as part of a joint Jordanian–Palestinian delegation, it seemed to many that the organisation's legitimacy was being exploited to gain concessions from the Palestinians as a whole. Indeed, the signing of this agreement allowed for renewed discussions of a possible confederation, a formula seen by many as a revival of the United Arab Kingdom project.

Clearly the main issue dividing Palestinians was the question of a settlement with Israel; while the PLO seemed to be marching headlong towards a settlement at any cost, opposition forces seemed unable to effectively counter this process, let alone stop it. Palestine was rife with black comedy, and, at times, the entire Palestinian effort appeared to be paralysed. Even the Amman Agreement failed to bear fruit, and the PLO was a stone's throw from being cast out of the equation altogether. However, Palestinian nationalism now moved in full-throttle; manifesting superb flexibility and acting against all odds, with the first intifada exploded in 1987, causing an enormous shift across the Palestinian political arena.

Rescue and salvation: The years of the first intifada

The intifada became a lifeline for the sinking organisation, but the uprising's most vivid impetus came from the Islamist movements that came to the forefront, and began to compete with the PLO on the ground. These movements took up the struggle on the basis that Palestine was an Islamic territory, and that armed struggle must be employed to liberate every inch of the land occupied by Israel. Nevertheless, the PLO tried to incorporate the intifada as an element of its own programme related to the political settlement in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In 1988, the PLO rushed to declare the establishment of a Palestinian state during a meeting of its National Council in Algeria.

The Islamic Jihad movement repudiated the PLO's efforts to politically co-opt the intifada, and challenged its legitimacy in two ways: (i) it argued that the PLO no longer reflected the will or the aspirations of the Palestinian public; and (ii) it highlighted the fact that the PLO's charter was devoid of any allusion or reference to an Islamic

programme. While the PLO was still struggling with its own internal divisions, opposition groups both inside and outside of the PLO initiated a rapprochement with Islamist groups. This new alignment gave birth to a Palestinian coalition of ten new forces, which later constituted a formidable opposition to the PLO and its policies.

As the PLO's attempts to bring the intifada into its own political programme continued to stumble, scepticism about the legitimacy of the PLO spread like wildfire. This scepticism became an integral part of the discourse adopted by many Palestinian groups, both Islamic and secular, particularly after the 1991 Madrid Conference was called by the USA and the USSR, and which the PLO agreed to attend based on the formula proposed by the 1985 Amman Agreement. That is, after all the efforts the PLO had expended to entrench itself as the sole representative of the Palestinian people, the organisation eventually agreed to embark on settlement talks as part of a joint delegation with Jordan.

It is a matter of record that the Madrid Conference took place after Iraq had invaded Kuwait in August 1990, and the USA, together with a UN coalition, had embarked on a war to 'liberate' Kuwait. The PLO's position on US interference, and its opposition to the war on Iraq, was soon used to cripple the organisation even further. Even its closest traditional allies embarked on a financial boycott and political blockade to stifle the PLO.

Later, it became clear that these actions were simply another means of trying to coerce the PLO into embracing a settlement dictated by the USA and Israel. This interpretation is supported by the fact that the blockade against the PLO was lifted only after the signing of the Oslo Accords, but the issue remains open to further scrutiny and discussion. Some believe the organisation had already expressed its willingness to strike a political deal. Others argue that, given the PLO's position that no single political party adequately represented the entirety of the Palestinian people, the PLO could have acknowledged that the political strategy being proposed was likely to undermine the rights of the Palestinian people, and should have stymied the strategy by refusing to participate in the conference.

The intifada did much to strengthen Palestinian nationalism, and after Jordan ceded its claim on the West Bank to the PLO, Arab opposition to the PLO effectively ended. It is also important that a number of PLO factions and Islamist forces continued to interact with one another. After joining the PLO, some factions began to talk about reviving and rebuilding the organisation on a new basis, while Islamist

groupings simply turned their backs on the PLO, considering it a relic of the past.

This debate gained momentum after the signing of the Oslo Accords. Questions were raised regarding the legitimacy of a liberation organisation that was willing to forfeit the larger portion of the territories it was established to recover. While some called on supporters to differentiate between the organisation and its leadership, it was becoming ever clearer that the PLO was being used as a velvet glove to force Palestinians to accept the Oslo Accords, pending its own exclusion or even extermination.

A curious paradox then arose. Most of the non-Islamist forces that had previously been sceptical of the PLO began voicing frantic calls to save the organisation from Oslo, and to separate it from the Palestinian Authority. That is, they wanted to ensure that the PLO remained representative of the entire Palestinian people, rather than just of residents of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, who were now to have their own authority, legislative council and elected president.

Years of stagnation, 1993 to 2006

The Oslo Accords were signed by the PLO, which is described in the agreement as 'representing the Palestinian people', but such rhetoric was used only when there was a need to use the organisation and its affiliates to support the Palestinian Authority's political orientation. For example, approximately a thousand people attended the meeting of the National Council held in Gaza to remove clauses from the National Charter. This made it difficult to distinguish the delegates from security guards and chaperones, and underscored the nebulous condition of the PLO as an organisation.

Overlapping duties and hierarchies were not the sole cause of this confusion, nor was the PLO's preoccupation with the day-to-day running of the Palestinian Authority. The confusion was mainly due to the fact that the PLO had become a puppet in service of the Palestinian Authority, and was now devoid of any real programme of its own.

Did all this come about through the conscious effort of the leadership? It is not easy to say for sure, but years of political frivolity opened the door to a myriad of possibilities, and the surreal nature of the contemporary Palestinian political scene can be summarised as follows:

- The PLO, along with some of its members, sees itself as embodying the legitimacy of the Palestinian cause, and as responsible for

administering both the Palestinian Authority and the entirety of Palestinian affairs, whereas, in fact, the organisation is being used to serve the Palestinian Authority.

- Other PLO members have called for the separation of the Palestinian Authority from the PLO and for the revitalisation and rebuilding of the PLO to protect the Palestinian national project.
- External forces that consider themselves as being aligned with the PLO call for rebuilding the PLO as a means of tackling issues pertaining to Palestinians in the diaspora, and relaunching a new national project that is oriented towards ensuring real transformation for ordinary Palestinians.
- Islamist groups continue to see the PLO as having lost legitimacy, and have vowed not to join the organisation until it is restructured to take into account the transformation of the Palestinian political scene.
- In general, the Palestinian public seems to agree that the PLO has, for too long, failed to take any effective action or make any impact, even in relation to minor social issues. The public tends to be unable to distinguish between the PLO as an institution and the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. This is hardly surprising as the president of the Palestinian Authority is also the head of the PLO, and members of the PLO's executive committee compete for ministerial posts that, in legal terms, are vastly inferior to their positions in the executive committee. Meanwhile, the PLO's National Council remains out of sight and out of action, and the representative missions flounder with vague terms of reference, unsure whether they are responsible to the Palestinian Authority's foreign ministry, the Palestinian state's foreign ministry or the PLO's political bureau.

Essentially, the PLO is in a state of deep sleep, and a new hierarchy known as the 'Palestinian leadership' has replaced the executive committee. Many have boldly suggested that the PLO was subjected to a systematic plan to exterminate it. While this is difficult to prove, it is accurate to note that the PLO has been rendered incapable of defending anyone, offering anything to its supposed constituents, or preventing injustice. In many areas that fall within the ambit of the organisation, various other structures, using a range of different pretexts, simply overrule the PLO's authority.

Accordingly, many Palestinians consider the PLO dead, and no longer see the organisation as embodying their aims. Many are asking if the

PLO is necessary, but no one has yet dared to answer this question in the negative. However, the fact that the question has arisen tellingly demonstrates the depth of the crisis in Palestinian consciousness with respect to the organisation.

National needs

Essentially, the years of stagnation are still in effect. Hamas's victory in the 2006 elections, and the ensuing heated debates, has not succeeded in transforming the organisation from being a tool or puppet into an active player. Many assumed that the martyrdom of Yasser Arafat in 2004 presented the PLO with a good opportunity to draw a dividing line between itself and the Palestinian Authority, and to direct Palestinian public sentiment into invigorating the PLO and its structures. Some called for rebuilding the PLO on a new basis that would enable it to effectively act for the national cause. However, these assumptions were dealt their first blow when the link between the PLO and the Palestinian Authority was further consolidated. The leadership of both entities was placed in the hands of a single person. The PLO's new chair ran for president, and he became head of both institutions concurrently. Subsequently, no transformation occurred within the PLO and political wrangling resumed as soon as intense nationalist sentiment associated with President Arafat's murder faded. The core of this political wrangling remains the question of legitimacy and points of reference. The second blow followed in the few days after the dialogue that took place in Cairo in March 2005.¹³

Setting sweet talk aside, the main aim of the Cairo meetings was to arrange a truce with the Israeli occupation. Mahmoud Abbas was extremely keen on preserving the ceasefire with the Israelis, and the factions that took part in the dialogue assumed that they would be able to secure a promise to set up a national process to rebuild the PLO in exchange for backing the continuation of the truce. Abbas offered the required promise and flew back with his prize, leaving many waiting for further dialogue that never took place. Various explanations were offered regarding the clause focused on reforming the PLO in the 2005 Cairo Declaration. The explanations were reminiscent of the twisted interpretations of UN Resolution 242, with some parties calling for the reformation of the PLO and others insisting that the organisation had to be rebuilt.

Practically speaking, the arguments cannot be reduced to mere semantics. Reformation and reinvigoration refer to the preservation of

the current political line and the introduction of adjustments to certain structures. Rebuilding, on the other hand, entails a third founding of the PLO, on par with what took place during the fourth and fifth meetings of the PLO's National Council in 1968 and 1969. Surprisingly, the organisation was neither reformed nor rebuilt. Instead, the PLO was blatantly stripped of its role in favour of the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The only department that retained any remnants of vitality, the PLO's political bureau, was deliberately isolated and stripped of its functions.

In short, the clause on reforming the PLO in the 2005 Cairo Declaration was used as a ruse to enforce the truce with Israel. After that, although many factions persistently called for its revitalisation, the PLO came to a standstill, and the organisation seemed earmarked for oblivion. Some components of the PLO fought to reinstate the organisation's rapidly declining role, and yearned to restore its legitimacy. Even the Islamist movements were not opposed to rebuilding the organisation under a new framework that would guarantee it more potent representation in the Palestinians' largest institution.

Under these conditions, as has been mentioned, Hamas emerged victorious from the 2006 elections held in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and took over the leadership of the Palestinian Authority and its legislative council from Fatah and other PLO factions. In real terms, power was now in the hands of Hamas, and the PLO immediately began to remind Palestinians that the organisation was the Palestinian Authority's supreme reference point. The goal of this manoeuvre was self-evident, and I will not delve into it here. However, it is clear that those who invoked the PLO's long-forgotten functions were simply trying to use the organisation as an instrument to preserve the incumbent political leaders, and to undermine the new Hamas-led government.

Thus the PLO was reduced to the deplorable state of a toxic force striving primarily for political gain, rather than playing the role it was founded to fulfil, namely protecting and representing the Palestinian people and their legitimate aspirations.

Had the outcome of the elections been used to create more momentum for the launch of a national forum on reforming the PLO, the Palestinian people's national needs might still have been met. The PLO remains, in theory at least, the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, and it still enjoys this recognition in Arab and international circles. The Palestinian Authority is merely one of its

apparatuses. Unless the entire Palestinian nationalist project simply aimed to establish an authority similar to that currently reigning over the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the need remains for a unified organisation that is capable of bringing together all components of the Palestinian people, wherever they may be found.

The PLO is the organisation that has been entrusted with all affairs pertaining to the Palestinian people. This necessitates the re-founding of the PLO under the banner of a clear nationalist programme, whereby the organisation commits itself to serving as a tool for the achievement of this programme. The Palestinian people long for this organisation; they want to see an active and vigorous PLO, capable of functioning as the refuge and final arbiter of the entire Palestinian political system. The re-founding of the PLO is essential if we are to prevent an irrevocable breakdown between what is now a fragile and destitute organisation and its homeless and occupied people.

Endnotes

- 1 Nasser made this admission in a speech to Arab trade unionists on 26 May 1967, saying: 'One day two years ago, I stood up to say we had no plan to liberate Palestine and that revolutionary action was our only course to liberate Palestine.' Foreign Broadcast Information Service, *Daily Report*, 27 May 1967.
- 2 This point was raised in interviews with Bilal al-Hassan (member of the ANM's command) in Damascus in 2003, and with Sami Kandil (member of the Regional Palestinian Leadership of the Baath Arab Socialist Party) in Beirut 2002.
- 3 This point was made by Salim Zanoun (member of Fatah's Central Committee), and Ahmad Jibril (Secretary-General of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command) during interviews with them.
- 4 The positions of the Mufti and the Higher Arab Committee can be found in editions of *Palestine* magazine, issued by the Committee in Beirut. This quote is from an interview with the late Khaled al-Fahoum, chair of the Palestinian National Council, cited in *Khaled al-Fahoum Remembers*, Dar al-Rowad, (Beirut, 1999). The information was confirmed in an interview with Shafiq al-Hout cited in 'Dialogues of the Century' in *Al Khaleej* (UAE), January 2000.
- 5 This term was originally coined by Ali Jarbawi.
- 6 This is an extract from an interview with historian, Mohsen Moh'd Saleh, in Beirut, 2005.
- 7 In 1968, the Popular Liberation Forces (better known as the Yarmouk Brigade) were established within the framework of the Palestine Liberation Army to perform commando actions against Israeli forces in the Gaza Strip. Generally, the Palestine Liberation Army refrained from this kind of underground action, having been established as a more conventional military force.
- 8 The 'Three Nos' are: no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, and no negotiations with Israel. The fourth 'no' proposed by al-Shuqayri was 'no unilateral solutions'. Al-Shuqayri addressed Nasser during the Khartoum summit

saying: 'We love you Mr President, but no one has the right to speak in the name of the Palestinian people.'

- 9 This is an extract from an interview with Salim Zanoun, one of the founders of Fatah, and a member of its central committee.
- 10 This is from an interview with Shafiq al-Hout, former member of the PLO executive committee.
- 11 This is from an interview with Talal Naji, assistant secretary-general of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.
- 12 The prince subsequently became king in 1892 and ruled until 2005.
- 13 The text of the 2005 Cairo Declaration is available at <http://www.alzaytouna.net/en/resources/documents>.

Part I Debate

*Moderated by Mahmoud Soueid
Director, Institute for Palestinian Studies, Beirut*

Majdi Hammad, *president of the Board of Trustees of the Lebanese International University, and a professor of political science*

What are the objectives and intrinsic circumstances that led to the predicament that the Palestinians find themselves in? After the signing of the Oslo Accords, the PLO was transformed from a liberation organisation into a vehicle for settlement – a precedent unmatched in its history. In 1972, the Palestinian National Council regarded negotiations with Israel as treason, yet it started making concessions after 1974. These concessions were followed by the PLO accepting the notion of Palestinian authority over territories liberated in 1985, the embracing of a federation with Jordan, and finally Yasser Arafat's three-dimensional vow to recognise Israel, end armed struggle and recognise UN Resolution 242. How did this come about? Although Anwar Sadat spearheaded reconciliation with Israel, Arafat's decision to recognise Israel was far more detrimental in that it legitimised the occupation, colonial settlement, and the founding of the state of Israel. Today we ask ourselves, what lessons have we learned from all this history? Is there a truly effective way to rebuild the PLO, or is the solution to launch a new organisation? What I fear and consider dangerous is for us to loiter in our current situation, thereby failing to create a new organisation and, at the same time, falling short of reviving the PLO.

Raafat Morra, *Hamas activist, and editor-in-chief of Filisteen al-Muslima*

The problem lies less in the development of Palestinian national consciousness within the PLO, and more with the deterioration of Palestinian attitudes towards the PLO. The PLO lost its support and preferential position because it squandered the trust of the Palestinian people – a trust that was placed in the PLO even though Palestinians could have chosen to support various other parties and ideologies instead. The PLO was the first to articulate the slogan of liberation, thus recognising the aspirations of the Palestinian people. The actions

of the PLO have since damaged its position and undermined the broad-based support it once enjoyed. From this perspective, although there are problems with the PLO, we have agreed on national principles we can draw on to rectify our path. In my view, what the various segments of the Palestinian people have in common supersedes any political entity or organisation. Our non-negotiable principles and national unity can be a catalyst for correcting the course of the PLO, and ensuring that it fulfils its role with regard to the liberation of Palestine.

Muhammad al-Bujairmi, *Palestinian activist*

I agree to a large extent with Shafiq al-Hout's opinion, but when he spoke about rebuilding the PLO, he mentioned amending the charter in light of new developments. In my view, the charter sets out our fundamental principles, and thus cannot be subjected to any alteration. The root of the divisions within the Palestinian camp is that some opted to recognise the state of Israel, and engaged in negotiations with the Zionists. When Nafez Abu Hasna described the position of various powers inside the PLO, he spoke quite generally. However, I would like to emphasise that the Islamist position was clear: the stands taken by the Muslim Brotherhood and Hizb ut-Tahrir were closer to that of Hajj Amin al-Husayni. Their position was born not of scepticism, but from the fact that the Islamist movement regards the Palestinian cause as the core issue uniting all Muslims. Fatah opposed the PLO when it was first launched, and again when the PLO took up arms. Thus, it can be argued that Fatah's early scepticism towards the PLO upped the ante.

Ghabi Jamal, *journalist and activist from Lebanon*

The Palestinian scene today is different from what it was forty years ago; the USA has set its sights on destroying the PLO. I wonder who is behind calls for the abolition of the organisation now? There are no serious endeavours to reform the PLO – Hamas's victory bears testament to this. All efforts seem to be focused on rehabilitating another opposition front. Recalling historical symbolism will not bring about the necessary support; nor will talk of opening the door to new factions, and allowing them to join the PLO. What we need to do is remove the present political structure and work to rebuild the PLO all over again, to restore its political foundations using the principles it was founded upon.

Hassan Nafaa, *prolific author and political-science scholar*

There are two ways to read history: blaming others, which is fruitless, or assessing our experiences in order to avoid repeating errors made in the past. It is the second way that concerns us here. Most importantly, how do we rebuild the PLO? Intellectuals need to address three questions when it comes to rebuilding the PLO. First, how to represent the Palestinian people, including 1948 Palestinians, those in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and the diaspora? Second, is there a formula that combines both resistance and negotiations? It is time this issue was addressed, and resolving it is quite possible. Thirdly, how to establish healthy relations with the Arab and Islamic worlds? The new organisation must address the peoples of the Arab and Islamic worlds, and take into account the fact that the Arab people want to support their Palestinian brethren.

Shafiq al-Hout, *journalist and author, founder member of the PLO who resigned from the executive after the signing of the Oslo Accords*

I agree with much of what has been said, but I see that there is something of a misconception regarding the PLO. The PLO is not an organisation. It is a political framework we established to wage our legitimate struggle. The faults of the PLO stem from the errors committed by Palestinian factions incorporated into the organisation. Indeed, Zionism is an enemy of the PLO, and so is western colonialism, but those who have inflicted the worst damage on the organisation have been its own leaders. It has been decades since any of the factions celebrated the anniversary of the birth of the PLO; in fact, the factions tend to curse the PLO. Yet, the PLO's constitution, as endorsed in 1964, is still the most honourable and prestigious of any Arab constitution. In many ways, the PLO is a reflection of the Palestinian people's reality.

It is important for us to distinguish between our fundamental principles and our views on the mechanisms that should govern our political activities. If we manage to reach a united position on our fundamental principles, we will be able to resolve the difficulties we face. If Hamas, Fatah, and the other Palestinian factions relinquish their partisan selfishness, we will be able to find agreement and create solutions. We must firmly believe in each faction's right to express itself and to put its ideology to the test, while accepting that truth lies in the common ground between our different positions.

Nafez Abu Hasna, *journalist and author*

I have a quick observation to wrap up after Shafiq al-Hout's profound comments. We are facing a novel and serious problem that we could choose to tackle without spite: since 1964, we have mercilessly flogged the PLO, then we found peace and lay the issue to rest. I believe that, this time, the solution to our problem is quite different. There is a need for us to consider a political programme that is capable of steering an interim programme as mentioned by Raafat Morra. To study this issue objectively, we must return to 1967 when the notion of a secular democratic state was first debated. Then we must search through the massive archive of minutes of meetings from that period to assess how the notion was developed. Palestinian factions convened for nine months in order to produce those minutes. Of course, not all of those minutes need to be discussed again, but we can identify and highlight some key issues.

As for how the interim programme should be run, I believe that what has been said by Shafiq al-Hout is very important. Let us not reduce the issues that face us to one person, nor begin to see the PLO as a single faction. The PLO was not established as a faction to carry out political skirmishes against other factions. The PLO is a national melting pot that combines the outputs of various nationalist factions, as well as their programmes and ideologies. The PLO is a reflection of the presence of all the forces within its ranks. I hope the sources included in my paper are carefully scrutinised, as I drew on the views of the most prominent historians.

PART II



CHAPTER 3

Towards an inclusive national charter

Muhammad Tayseer al-Khatib

Most Palestinian political initiatives have arisen in response to grassroots pressures, as well as regional and international political fluctuations. Despite the simplicity of the Palestinian cause, and its clear political and legal legitimacy, its struggle has seen the implementation of a myriad of programmes – some of which have been beneficial but many of which have not.

International pressures and shifts in the balance of power – either between the Palestinian and other Arab nations and the Zionist enemy, or between the international forces that support the Arab peoples (including the Palestinians), and opposing forces, led by the United Kingdom and (since the Suez War of 1956) the United States – have led to frequent changes in positions and programmes on both sides of the struggle. This has created chaos around the Palestinian cause, which threatens to jeopardise the future of our people.

The ‘flexibility’ of the Palestinian leadership has greatly damaged the Palestinian cause. An injustice that is as clear as a mathematical equation has been transformed into a jumble of ambiguity that has damaged the interests of the Palestinian people and their cause. The lack of clarity on the difference between tactics and strategy has blurred the dividing line between political positions (which should be based on a clear, and long-term historical and legal framework), and temporary political manoeuvres (that are resorted to in order to achieve interim objectives dictated by specific pressures within a limited timeline).

Thus, while the Palestinian cause has been subject to repeated attempts to nullify or mollify it, Palestinian political programmes have constantly changed and multiplied. Ultimately, this has led to fundamental clauses in the Palestinian National Charter being illegally cancelled. Broad-based and diligent discussion is required if we are to arrive at a new national charter that incorporates the political, historic, legal and national roots of the Palestinian cause. Such a charter would

help to put an end to the futile tendency to heed the visions and whims of forces outside the struggle. We must develop a comprehensive national Palestinian charter, which encapsulates and unifies Palestinian objectives once and for all, and which is then no longer open to amendment or alteration. This charter or covenant must be able to serve as a clear reference point for those who support this particular struggle. Yes, some clauses may be slightly subject to interpretation, and make room for tactical shifts over time, but the fundamental principles of the document should not be open to negation, deletion or renunciation, no matter what pressures are brought to bear.

Just as the PLO must be reconstructed on new foundations, the Palestinians' national charter must be reformulated, or the National Charter that was in effect prior to the Oslo Accords must be re-adopted. However, this is only achievable if clear and straightforward processes are followed. That is, the Palestinian cause must not be reduced to the parameters specified by specific segments or factions within the struggle, nor must distinctions be drawn between Palestinians living in Palestine and those in the diaspora. In addition, Palestinian thinkers, intellectuals, as well as civil society organisations in Palestine and abroad, must play an effective role in this project.

Developments in Palestine highlight how unstable political visions, and multiple codes of reference, fuel political turmoil. For example, in the 1960s and 1970s, the leadership of the PLO avoided focusing on objective goals, and instead established scores of institutions, structures and bodies that have since spawned utter chaos. The turmoil has escalated since the Palestinian National Authority was established: two representative councils now exist (the Palestinian National Council and the Palestinian Legislative Council), two structures are responsible for external political activity (the Palestinian Authority inside Palestinian territory and the PLO overseas); and there are two executives (the presidency in Ramallah and the government in Gaza). As far as I know, no other liberation struggle in history has survived such mayhem.

Meanwhile, the political struggle in Palestine has escalated, along with unprecedented divisions and infighting between factions inside and outside the PLO. To end this state of chaos, all parties have to see the need to agree on a new Palestinian charter, rebuild the PLO on new foundations, revoke the conflicting roles and mandates allocated to the various political institutions, and reorganise Palestinian ranks. By this, I do not mean to suggest that all Palestinian ideologies must unite behind a single vision; this is impossible. I am merely proposing that

an attempt be made to establish clear principles and mechanisms for governing and arbitrating Palestinian affairs.

Unfortunately, the Palestinian cause has suffered enormously from organisational disputes over who will monopolise, dominate and manipulate political power. Time and again, short-term political interests and power struggles have trumped Palestinian national interests, and undermined the Palestinian cause. These power struggles have laid the groundwork for the disastrous situation that blights our past and haunts our present.

What we need is an honest endeavour to dig our way out of chaos and dissent. We must use the knowledge accumulated through the failures of our past to pave the way for the introduction of a diverse and multi partisan government. No single Palestinian faction must ever again be allowed to rule singlehandedly, no matter how strong its support on the streets or in the ballot box.

In contributing to the process of reformulating a new and comprehensive Palestinian national charter, I would like to propose a package of preliminary mechanisms and standards that any new charter must include. In my view, a new charter must:

- Reflect the clear and undisputed historical facts pertaining to the Palestinian situation; and not be subject to adjustment and transformation as a result of pressures that may be brought to bear on the liberation movement.
- Distance itself from political terminology associated with partial and tactical solutions, and re-embrace the notion that the Palestinian cause cannot be resolved without addressing the rights of all Palestinians to all the land of Palestine. (In my view, the Palestinians' fundamental problem is their right to return to their homeland; the political structure they will choose to govern themselves once they are all home can be determined later.)
- Assert the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homeland; a natural right underlined and protected by international decisions.
- Take into consideration the presence of Palestinians inside Palestine, including those within the 1948 borders, and those living outside Palestine. All must be treated equally with respect to rights and duties, regardless of discrepancies in their circumstances, conditions and roles.
- Entrench the principle that the legitimacy of any referendum or election process depends on the participation of Palestinians inside and outside the homeland.

- Ensure that any councils or institutions established inside Palestine to organise the daily lives of Palestinians there are not seen as representing the Palestinian people as a whole. In other words, it must be acknowledged that such structures represent the proportion of Palestinians who live within the Occupied Territory only, and are not capable of representing Palestinians who live in the diaspora.

CHAPTER 4

The Palestinian National Council: Restructuring for fairer representation

Mohsen Moh'd Saleh

The Palestinian National Council (PNC) is the representative legislative body for all Palestinians, both inside Palestine and abroad. According to article 7-A of the Fundamental Law of the PLO, which sets out the structures and procedures of the organisation, the National Council is 'the highest authority of the PLO, and it is the body that draws up the policy of the PLO and its plans and programmes'. The National Council thus should serve as the supreme reference point for all authorities and institutions stemming from the PLO, and govern all aspects of constitutional, legal, political and public policy relating to all the fundamental issues concerning the Palestinian people and their interests.

Article 5 of the Fundamental Law states that the PNC is to be directly elected by the Palestinian people. The electoral system, as defined on 17 July 1965, states, 'Every Palestinian has the right to vote in PNC elections if he/she is eighteen years old, if his/her name has been recorded in the final electoral registers, if he/she is of sound mind, and has not been convicted of a crime against national honour.'

The PNC's inaugural meeting was held from 28 May to 2 June 1964 in Jerusalem; it was then that the PLO was born, and the Palestinian National Charter and the Fundamental Law were adopted.¹ A total of 397 people were invited to the meeting, 249 of whom were from Jordan as that country was responsible for administering the West Bank at the time. However, the PNC was not the first representative gathering called by the Palestinian people. At the beginning of the British occupation of Palestine, the Palestinian Arab Congress was formed and it convened seven times between 1919 and 1928. Moreover, during the 1948 war, the first Palestinian National Council convened in Gaza on 10 July 1948, in response to calls from the All-Palestine Government and the Higher Arab Committee. However, the PNC as we know it today cannot claim

to be descended from these initiatives for various reasons, one of which relates to the opposition expressed by various Arab regimes to the rise of an independent Palestinian entity.

Structures within the PLO

According to the PLO's Fundamental Law, the PNC is elected for a three-year period, and can be called into conference once a year at the behest of its president. According to Article 8 of the Law, extraordinary sessions of the PNC can be called by the PNC president at the request of the executive committee or a quarter of the PNC's members. The PNC comes into quorum when two-thirds of the members are present, and decisions are taken on the basis of a simple majority.

The Palestinian Central Council is an substructure of the PNC. It was formed in 1973 as an intermediary body that would meet at least twice a month. Initially, the Central Council had just thirty-two delegates. This small number was designed to ensure that meetings could be held with relative ease. It was hoped that this would increase flexibility and expedite decision making. However, additional members have since been added, and at the meeting held in September 2000, the Council had 128 members.

Of course, the PNC elects the PLO's executive committee, which officially has eighteen members and sits in permanent session. Two-thirds (twelve) of the members constitute a quorum. The most recent elections for the executive committee took place in April 1996. Between 1996 and 2006, four members of that committee died, namely: Yasser Arafat, Faisal al-Husseini, Yasser Amr and Sulaiman an-Najjab. A fifth member, Abdurrahim Mallouh, was being held captive in a Zionist prison, and a sixth member, Assad Abdurrahman, had tendered his resignation. A seventh member, Faruq al-Qaddumi, was boycotting the executive committee, and refrained from attending its meetings. The PLO's Fundamental Law prescribes that if a third (six) of the seats on the executive committee become vacant, a special meeting must be called into session within no more than thirty days.

The PNC is the representative body that bestowed legitimacy on the PLO and its leadership. By extrapolation, therefore, the PLO obtained its status as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people via the PNC. The PNC also plays a role in preserving Palestinian national identity, and in defending independent decision making, although it is also true to say that the PNC has sometimes been used to confer

legitimacy on decisions taken by PLO leaders after they had basically hijacked the PNC's decision-making processes.

A critical review of the history of the PNC

By 1996, when its last meeting was held, the PNC had met twenty-one times – an average of one meeting every two years, albeit that the Fundamental Law states that meetings should occur at least once a year. However, closer examination of the chronology of the meetings paints a grimmer picture (see Table 4.1) and reveals that the frequency of PNC meetings has radically decreased over time. During its first ten years (1964 to 1973), the PNC called eleven meetings. In the following decade (1974 to 1983), only five sessions took place. From 1984 to 1993, four sessions were held, and in the thirteen years from 1993 to 2006, only one meeting was held. In other words, since the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, the PNC has effectively relinquished its legislative and regulatory role, and has been sidelined from Palestinian national decision making. In addition, the meeting that was called into session in April 1996 was convened because of the pressure exerted on the PNC by the USA and Israel to annul all clauses in the Palestinian National Charter that oppose Israel and Zionism. As mentioned in Chapter 1, PNC members attended a notorious ceremony in Gaza on 14 December 1998 at which, in the presence of US president, Bill Clinton, they endorsed the removal of clauses in the National Charter that call for or imply the destruction of Israel. At the same event, the PNC adopted a new set of articles and codes, thereby submitting Palestinians to the terms dictated by the Wye River Memorandum.

In recent years, many people have criticised the PNC, arguing that it has lost its vitality and effectiveness. Journalists, academics and politicians have argued that the PNC is now merely an instrument in the hands of the PLO leadership, which exercises its will unilaterally and independently, forges agreements and joins negotiations, engages in struggles and reaches settlements, returning to obtain the PNC's seal of approval only when circumstances make this unavoidable.

The direct relationship between the signing of the Oslo Accords, the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, and the weakening and deterioration of the PLO cannot be denied. PNC member, Arafat Hijazi, wrote that when the 1996 session of the PNC was held, Yasser Arafat told him: 'This will be the last and final meeting of the PNC... not a single meeting will be held anywhere ever again!'² Effectively,

Table 4.1 Meetings of the Palestinian National Council, 1964 to 1996

Meeting number	Head	Date	Type	Meeting president
1	Jerusalem	5 May–2 June 1964	Ordinary	Ahmad al-Shuqayri
2	Cairo	31 May–4 June 1965	Ordinary	Ahmad al-Shuqayri
3	Gaza	20–24 May 1966	Ordinary	Abdel Mohsin Al-Qattan
4 ^a	Cairo	10–17 July 1968	Ordinary	Yahya Hammuda
5	Cairo	1–4 February 1969	Ordinary	Khaled al-Fahoum
6	Cairo	1–6 September 1969	Ordinary	Khaled al-Fahoum
7	Cairo	30 May–4 June 1970	Ordinary	Khaled al-Fahoum
Emergency	Amman	27–28 August 1970	Extraordinary	Khaled al-Fahoum
8	Cairo	28 February–5 March 1971	Ordinary	Khaled al-Fahoum
9	Cairo	7–13 July 1971	Ordinary	Khaled al-Fahoum
10	Cairo	6–10 April 1972	Emergency	Khaled al-Fahoum
11	Cairo	6–10 January 1973	Ordinary	Khaled al-Fahoum
12	Cairo	1–8 June 1974	Ordinary	Khaled al-Fahoum
13	Cairo	12–22 March 1977	Ordinary	Khaled al-Fahoum
14	Damascus	15–22 January 1979	Ordinary	Khaled al-Fahoum
15	Damascus	11–19 April 1981	Ordinary	Khaled al-Fahoum
16	Algiers	14–22 February 1983	Ordinary	Khaled al-Fahoum
17	Amman	22–29 November 1984	Ordinary	Abdul Hamid al-Saeh
18	Algiers	20–25 April 1987	Ordinary	Abdul Hamid al-Saeh
19 ^b	Algiers	12–15 November 1988	Extraordinary	Abdul Hamid al-Saeh
20	Algiers	23–28 September 1991	Ordinary	Abdul Hamid al-Saeh
21 ^c	Gaza	22–25 April 1996	Ordinary	Salim Zanoun

Notes: a. The 1968 meeting saw the inauguration of the new PNC. b. The November 1988 meeting led to the Declaration of Independence. c. The 1996 meeting debated the removal of most clauses of the National Charter.

that meeting was called only to declare invalid the aims and objectives for which the PNC and the PLO were originally established, namely the liberation of the territories west of the West Bank. Essentially, the PNC was so weakened by years of subjection that its later meetings served as little more than a kind of carnival, marking the lack of consensus among Palestinian ranks, albeit that decisions that were taken have been met by a hail of applause.

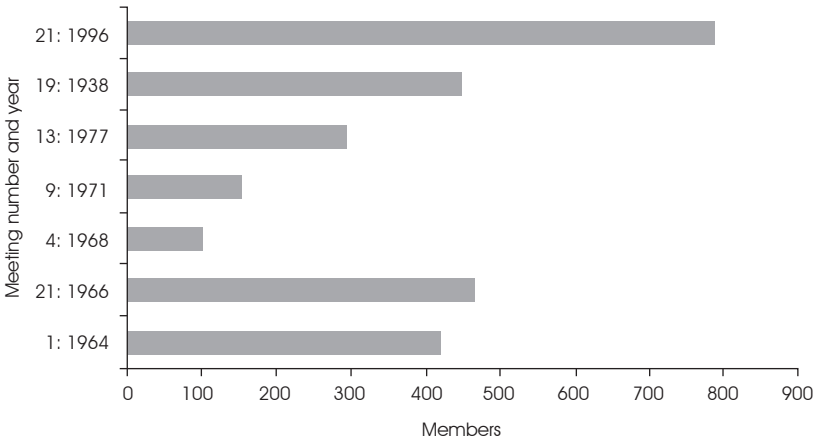
Membership: structural imbalances

The inaugural PNC meeting took place in Jerusalem in 1964. That event was attended by 422 delegates (although only 397 formal invitations were issued). The number of members grew to 466 at the PNC's third meeting in Gaza on 5 May 1966, when armed Palestinian factions (particularly Fatah) gained control of the PLO. The PNC was then reshuffled and resized in order to ensure greater flexibility and more effective discussion at meetings. By the fourth meeting, which took place in Cairo on 10 July 1968, the PNC consisted of just 100 members. However, this number was subsequently increased again, reaching 155 members in 1971, 293 in 1977, and 450 by 1988 (see Table 4.2). But the number of PNC members taking part during the twenty-first meeting in 1996 remains a mystery. No official record of the exact number seems to exist, but most sources indicate that it exceeded 700. Some PNC sources put the number at between 738 and 787 members. Of these, 717 members retained full membership status as of May 2006.³

Table 4.2 Increases in the number of PNC members at selected meetings

Meeting	Year	Number of members	Notes
1	1964	422	
3	1966	466	
4	1969	100	
5	1969	105	
6	1969	112	
7	1970	15	
9	1971	155	
11	1973	180	
12	1974	187	
13	1977	293	Approximately a hundred members from the Occupied Territories were added
15	1981	315	18 new members added, the quota for the Occupied Territory increased from 122 to 180, but excluded from the quorum
19	1988	450	330 members participated, 253 supported the Palestinian Declaration of Independence, 46 members opposed, 10 abstained and 21 were absent)
21	1996	787	

Figure 4.1 Growth in PNC membership, 1964–1996



Salim Zanoun (also known as Abu al-Adib), chair of the PNC since 1993, and a member of Fatah's executive committee, admitted the existence of conflicting logs and discrepancies in the number of PNC members, noting: 'The Gaza records give a different account than those in Ramallah; and both differ from the logs of the PNC presidency in Amman!'⁴ Zanoun's confusion about how many members form part of the council he presides over underlines the pathetic situation of the PNC in relation to Palestinian political processes. It begs the question: who is to blame for the state of the PNC, and what are the election criteria and standards for choosing PNC members?

What we do know is that the exponential increase in the number of PNC members means that the size of the PNC has grown beyond its ability to function effectively; even regular meetings are difficult to convene. In addition, it is clear that new members recruited to the PNC (often under various pretexts, such as being independent, or representing popular organisations) are often loyal to the leadership of the PLO (that is, to Fatah), and so they tend to favour Fatah's recommendations. In other words, the absence of clear standards for the nomination and election of candidates for PNC membership opened the door to structural imbalances in its composition, and the organisation is now less in touch with, and less able to represent, the will of the Palestinian people.

Veteran journalist, Arafat Hijazi, has noted that Salim Zanoun was badly shaken in 1996, when the PNC leadership's offices in Gaza were raided, and all PNC documents were forcefully transferred to the presidency of the Palestinian Authority. The Palestinian Authority then allegedly rigged the list of PNC members, adding names of members prior to the meeting at which the PNC voted on the proposal to annul the Palestinian National Charter. Hijazi noted that the most difficult moment for Zanoun was 'the day when two PNC membership lists materialised; one in Salim Zanoun's office, the real membership list with no more than 400 members, while the PA presidency waved a totally different list... to which more than 450 new names had been added. This meant that the number of PNC members authorised to attend the session to vote on annulling the Charter was in excess of 850 members. This was done without Salim Zanoun's acknowledgement or consent, without referring the new names to the PNC committees for study and approval, and without obtaining ratification for them during the official PNC debate.'⁵

Zanoun himself has mentioned that the composition of the PNC was supposed to be structured such 'that a quarter of members represent

the first generation, a quarter represent the factions, a quarter represent people's unions and a quarter comprise members injected into the PNC in 1996'.⁶ This structure, in addition to the well-known complications created by the factions and the unions, makes it possible for the PNC to tamper with the criteria linked to what makes a representative of the Palestinian people – this is especially true in relation to the first and last quarters mentioned. Besides, the size of the forum offers neither the efficiency nor the flexibility necessary for urgent meetings or rapid decision making. One can legitimately ask why the number of PNC members should outnumber the Chinese national council, the Indian parliament, and the US Congress, and why it has over seven times as many members as the Jordanian parliament, and is six times larger than the Lebanese parliament!

Popular representation

How well does the PNC membership reflect the opinions of the broader Palestinian public? Any attempt to answer this question faces the following complex and multifaceted problems:

- The difficulty (perhaps even impossibility) of holding free and fair elections for all Palestinians, particularly in countries (such as Jordan) that have specific sensitivities in relation to this issue, or countries that simply refuse to consider holding elections on their soil.
- The fact that some of the most popular Palestinian factions (especially Hamas) are part of neither the PLO nor the PNC. Hamas has demanded that the PLO be restructured before it will consider joining the organisation.
- The lack of honest political will (to date, anyway) in the higher echelons of the PLO to revitalise the role of the PNC, or to base its composition on realistic popular representation. Instead, certain PLO leaders cling to power and attempt to monopolise decision making.
- The fact that the mechanism currently governing the representation and participation of the 1948 Palestinians⁷ indicates that they make up 11.2 per cent of the total number of Palestinians worldwide. However, their special conditions, and the risk of retaliation from the Zionist entity, means that caution on this issue is essential; any initiatives must be based on the counsel of these Palestinians themselves.

- The difficulty of carrying out an accurate census of the number of Palestinians abroad, albeit that approximate numbers can be provided.

Notwithstanding these problems, the difficulty of holding elections for the Palestinian people must not be exaggerated. Free elections have been conducted in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and indications are that the same could be done in Lebanon and a number of western countries. Conceding that elections cannot be safely held in Jordan does not necessarily mean that it is not possible to identify the approximate size of various Palestinian communities in that country; membership lists from professional associations and clubs, participants in the Jordanian elections, opinion polls, etc. could be drawn upon to provide reasonably accurate estimates.

The Cairo Declaration forged by Palestinian factions in mid-March 2005 could have been a pivotal turning point in terms of revitalising and reconstructing the PLO. Hamas announced its agreement to participate in rebuilding the organisation, on condition that it be given a real hand in Palestinian decision making, and that the reform process would not be superficial or cosmetic, but pursued in earnest, with the aim of once again making the PLO a point of reference for the entire Palestinian people. However, the PLO leadership failed to meet its obligations under the Cairo Declaration vis-à-vis the rebuilding of the organisation, and leaders of the Palestinian armed forces and political factions were not even invited to discuss the issue. A year after the Cairo talks, not a single step had been taken, casting doubt on the PLO leadership's seriousness in this regard.

In 2005, it was almost unanimously agreed that the number of PNC members be set at around 300, half of whom would come from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and the other half from the diaspora. PNC president Salim Zanoun, and his vice-president Tayseer Kabaa, made this announcement more than once,⁸ and the proposed numbers drew no objections from Fatah, Hamas or any other organisation. Zanoun stressed that representatives of Palestinians living on home soil would be chosen via elections, while representatives of Palestinians in the diaspora would be included by consensus where elections were deemed unfeasible.

However, Hamas's landslide victory in the elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council held in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip on 25 January 2006 dealt a shocking blow to the dominant forces within the PLO leadership, the same leaders who rule the PNC. Hamas won

seventy-four seats, leaving Fatah with just forty-five seats. Out of the blue, Zanoun then began making bizarre comments contradicting his earlier statements. He presided over a meeting at the PNC headquarters in Jordan on 4 February 2006, at which over a hundred PNC and Fatah cadres affirmed that the PNC would continue its work in spite of a severe financial crisis. It was stated that the PNC would defend every one of its members, and that it would tolerate no challenges to the authenticity of the number or composition of its members. Zanoun then listed what he called the 'detrimental repercussions' that would result from restructuring the PNC, and from lowering its membership from 700 to 300 members. He argued that this would mean that the West Bank and the Gaza Strip would lose 400 members, and that the reselection and re-election of members would open the door to endless infighting. He then declared that the PNC leadership would preserve the PNC's composition, and that he would defend the PNC to the last drop of his blood.

Opening a session of the Palestinian Legislative Council on 16 February 2006, Zanoun announced that the Legislative Council's 132 members would be added to the PNC, taking the total number of PNC members to 783. This step undoubtedly undermined efforts to reform or reclaim the PLO, or to ensure that elected members would fill the appointed quotas. Zanoun reiterated his determination to carry out his plans when he met with Jordan-based members of the PNC on 11 May 2006. Meanwhile, the PNC's director-general, Abdul Raouf al-Alami, maintained that seventy members would be chosen during the upcoming PNC meeting to fill the seats of members who had died. Zanoun's statements stoked concerns regarding Fatah's seriousness about honest, transparent and effective reforms within the PLO. Ideally, Zanoun should have refrained from acting as a member of Fatah's central committee, and lived up to his role as president of the legislative body by representing the bulk of Palestinians.

On the other hand, when the Palestinian Legislative Council passed a new law on elections (No. 9 of 2005), articles stating that the Legislative Council was an integral part of the PNC were omitted. This occurred despite the fact that the Legislative Council's term in office had already expired, and that this move directly contradicted the law issued by the late PLO president, Yasser Arafat, in 1995, prior to the election of the first Legislative Council. Members of the PLO executive committee and the PNC president had taken part in drafting the earlier legislation. The new law effectively severed the link between the PLO's

National Council and the Authority's Legislative Council. The two-page explanatory memorandum, included in the earlier legislation, was also omitted. That memorandum stated: 'The conducting of elections for the presidency of the Palestinian Authority and membership of the Palestinian Legislative Council as being contingent on membership of the PNC underscores the unification of the Palestinian people wherever they may be found, and marks an important step en route to accomplishing our people's national rights, legitimate demands, building their future institutions, and making them accountable to the sovereignty of the people.'

According to Zanon, when President Mahmoud Abbas was informed of this 'crime of omission', the president was infuriated. During a meeting on 13 February 2006 at PNC headquarters in Amman, Zanon told a crowd of PNC members that Abbas had assured him that he had no prior knowledge of this deed, and that he had been tricked into signing its endorsement. Zanon maintains that he was made aware that the aforementioned articles had been dropped from the legislation just a week before the legislative elections by a reporter from the *Jerusalem Post*. Zanon apparently considered resigning from the PNC if the error was not rectified, indicating that cutting the Palestinian Legislative Council off from the PNC implied the abolition of the right of return for Palestinian refugees, and the beginning of the end for the PLO.

However, Zanon never indicated who had been behind the passing of this 'surreptitious' legislation or who should bear responsibility for it, nor did he explain how the Palestinian Legislative Council, led by the faction to which Zanon himself belonged, could commit such a 'crime' (to use his own word). Is it likely that Zanon was only made aware of the endorsement of such ultrasensitive legal material, which is of vital importance to the PNC and the presidency of the Palestinian Authority, months after the legislation had been passed, and worse still, by an Israeli journalist? And this while the president who signed the bill protests his innocence? In any event, the news came out that Abbas had issued a decree ordering elected members of the Palestinian Legislative Council to be counted as members of the PNC.

Fair representation on the PNC requires a reconsideration of the number of delegates who represent the diaspora, and transparent mechanisms for elections whenever possible. This alone will spur a real change in the balance of power in favour of the Islamist forces. According to data obtained from parliamentary elections, as well as

from unions and professional associations, Palestinian Islamist factions have significant support in Jordan and in the Occupied Territory. Two opinion polls conducted by al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies and Consultations in November 2005 and May 2006 showed that Hamas and Fatah enjoyed roughly the same level of support among Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, but that support for Hamas had increased by the time the second poll was taken.

Ensuring popular representation will require a new social contract and a pact of honour whereby all parties to the PNC (including Hamas and Fatah) agree to adhere to the principle of peaceful rotation of power, and agree to concede authority strictly through the ballot box, thus putting an end to any one party being able to monopolise political power.

The geographic distribution of Palestinians

According to estimates by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, the number of Palestinian refugees reached 10.1 million at the end of 2005. This figure includes 4.9 million Palestinians inside historic Palestine (of whom 2.4 million live in the West Bank, 1.4 million live in the Gaza Strip and 1.1 million live in 1948 occupied Palestine). Of the 5.2 million Palestinian refugees living abroad, approximately 3 million are in Jordan. Closer investigation of the available data reveals that these figures are quite rough approximations, particularly those that gauge the numbers of Palestinians living abroad. Estimates are often flawed, due to:

- The difficulty (or even impossibility) of accurately determining the number of Palestinians abroad, given the reluctance of Arab regimes to conduct a census or to co-operate in data gathering. In addition, Palestinians are now spread across the globe, and many Palestinians hold citizenship of more than one country simultaneously.
- Errors in estimating the number of Palestinians inside the Occupied Territory: for example, residents of Jerusalem have been double-counted, once by the Palestinian Authority, which calculated the population of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, including approximately 245 000 in East Jerusalem, and a second time when the Israeli state calculated the number of '1948 Palestinians', and included residents of Jerusalem in this data too.
- Palestinians who leave Palestine, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon to work in the Arab Gulf states, the USA or elsewhere, tend to remain registered with the UN Relief and Works Agency as living locally or in countries surrounding the Occupied Territory.

In any event, a margin of error must be taken into account when dealing with numbers of Palestinians, although this can be reduced by various comparative statistical studies. Table 4.3 provides an approximate number of Palestinians inside and outside Palestine; the data therein is similar to that published by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics.

Table 4.3 Approximate numbers of Palestinians worldwide in 2005

Place	Number
West Bank	2 400 000
Gaza Strip	1 400 000
1948 Occupied Territory (Israel)	1 130 000
Egypt	61 000
Iraq	40 000
Jordan	2 942 000
Kuwait	73 000
Lebanon	404 000
Libya	34 000
Saudi Arabia	347 000
Syria	457 000
Arab Gulf states	180 000
Other Arab countries	7 000
Europe	255 000
North and South America	267 000
Rest of the world	107 000
Total Palestinians inside Palestine	4 930 000
Total Palestinians abroad	5 174 000
Total	10 104 000

For most of the PNC's meetings, its membership and decision-making processes were largely in the hands of Palestinians living abroad. In the period after Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and up to the Oslo Accords (that is, from 1967 to 1993), PNC membership was actually restricted to Palestinians abroad. In 1977 it was decided

that, without revealing their identities, around a hundred members from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip would be added to the PNC. In 1981, that number rose to 180 members. However, these additional members were not counted within the PNC's quorum, thus Palestinians residing inside the Occupied Territory were still effectively excluded from the PNC's decision-making processes.

However, at the PNC's twenty-first meeting, held in Gaza in April 1996, this trend was reversed, and most decisions were taken by Palestinians living on home soil. The 1996 meeting took place in the wake of the Oslo Accords, and the establishment of the Palestinian Authority. Various other sweeping changes were made then too. For example, it was decided that out of a total of 787 members, the PNC would now include 520 members (66 per cent) from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. This created a major imbalance in the structural composition of the PNC because if one includes the 1948 Palestinians, Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip represent 37.6 per cent of the total Palestinian population, and if one excludes the 1948 Palestinians, they make up 42.2 per cent of the population. Thus, just 63 (8 per cent) PNC members live in Jordan, despite the fact that almost 30 per cent of the total Palestinian population live in that country. This raised concerns that Palestinian representation might one day be restricted solely to people living in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and this then set alarm bells ringing with respect to a final solution being found that may entirely exclude Palestinian refugees.

In any event, assuming that consensus is reached on the need to restructure the PNC in ways that take into account the numbers of Palestinians inside the Occupied Territory and abroad, and if the total number of members in the new PNC is to be about 300, then two possible scenarios confront us.

The first, which I have labelled Scenario 1, allows for the full quota of 1948 Palestinians, allotting 147 seats to representatives of Palestinians living within the Occupied Territory – 71 seats for the West Bank, 42 for the Gaza Strip, and 34 seats for the 1948 Palestinians. Palestinians abroad would get 153 seats – 87 for Palestinians in Jordan, 14 for Palestinians in Syria, 12 for Palestinians in Lebanon, and 10 for Palestinians in Saudi Arabia (see Table 4.4).

Table 4.4 Scenario 1: the distribution of PNC seats, including the 1948 Palestinians

Place of residence	Palestinian residents in 2005	Number of seats
West Bank	2 400 000	71
Gaza Strip	1 400 000	42
1948 Occupied Territory (Israel)	1 130 000	34
Egypt	61 000	2
Iraq	40 000	1
Jordan	2 942 000	87
Kuwait	73 000	2
Lebanon	404 000	12
Libya	34 000	1
Saudi Arabia	347 000	10
Syria	457 000	14
Other Arab Gulf states	180 000	5
Other Arab countries	7000	0
Europe	255 000	8
North and South America	267 000	8
Rest of the world	107 000	3
Total Palestinians inside Palestine	4 930 000	147
Total Palestinians abroad	5 174 000	153
Total	10 104 000	300

Note: Numbers have been rounded off.

A second scenario excludes the 1948 Palestinians by not incorporating them in the quorum. This, once again, presents us with two choices. Scenario 2, Option 1 distributes the seats on a geographical basis using the size of the population as the sole criterion. This would mean giving 127 seats to Palestinians in the Occupied Territory – 80 to the West Bank, and 47 to the Gaza Strip. Palestinians abroad would obtain 173 seats – 98 seats for Jordan, 15 for Syria, 14 for Lebanon and 12 seats for Saudi Arabia (see Table 4.5).

Table 4.5 Scenario 2, Option 1: distribution of PNC seats excluding the 1948 Palestinians

Place	Palestinian residents in 2005	Number of seats
West Bank	2 400 000	80
Gaza Strip	1 400 000	47
Egypt	61 000	2
Iraq	40 000	1
Jordan	2 942 000	98
Kuwait	73 000	2
Lebanon	404 000	14
Libya	34 000	1
Saudi Arabia	347 000	12
Syria	457 000	15
Other Arab Gulf states	180 000	6
Other Arab countries	7 000	0
Europe	255 000	9
North and South America	267 000	9
Rest of the world	107 000	4
Total Palestinians inside Palestine	3 800 000	127
Total Palestinians abroad	5 174 000	173
Total	8 974 000	300

Scenario 2, Option 2 distributes seats equally between Palestinians living inside the Occupied Territory and those abroad – 150 seats for representatives from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and 150 for representatives of those living abroad. This leaves 85 seats for Palestinians in Jordan, 13 for Palestinians in Syria, 12 for those in Lebanon, and 10 for those in Saudi Arabia (see Table 4.6).

Table 4.6 Scenario 2, Option 2: distribution of PNC seats for Palestinians abroad excluding the 1948 Palestinians, and assuming that 150 seats are allocated to residents in the West Bank and Gaza Strip

Place	Palestinians residents in 2005	Number of seats
Egypt	61 000	2
Iraq	40 000	1
Jordan	2 942 000	85
Kuwait	73 000	2
Lebanon	404 000	12
Libya	34 000	1
Saudi Arabia	347 000	10
Syria	457 000	13
Other Gulf Arab states	180 000	5
Other Arab Countries	7 000	0
Europe	255 000	7
North and South America	267 000	8
Rest of the world	107 000	3
Total	5 174 000	150

Towards an effective PNC

Based on the successful, democratic and transparent elections held by the Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip on 25 January 2006, we have an obligation to encourage the continuation and enhancement of this experiment, and to ensure that it forms the foundation of the structural reforms required for the PLO and its institutions, primarily the PNC. The Palestinian cause is facing enormous challenges that necessitate unity among all Palestinians in the face of their enemies. This national unity, along with the Arab, Islamic and human dimensions of the Palestinian cause, should be drawn upon to support and resolve the Palestinian issue. Accordingly, I recommend that we:

- Work towards a joint nationalist programme that enables all segments and factions of Palestinian society to work together under a unified institutional framework.

- Adopt a code of honour that defends the sanctity of Palestinian blood, ensures a peaceful transfer of power, revitalises the PLO and its institutions and consecrates the principles of accountability and transparency.
- Set a fixed timetable that expedites the closing of Palestinian ranks and precludes infighting.
- Establish a higher commission with real executive authority to oversee arrangements for establishing a new PNC.
- Set up local commissions in various countries that have a Palestinian presence to organise elections.
- Encourage local and international civil society institutions to intensify their efforts to promote awareness and lobby for the formation of a new national council for the Palestinian people.
- Liaise with governments, official regimes, and research foundations concerned with Palestinian affairs, to conduct a census of Palestinians, register the outcome and facilitate the participation of all Palestinians in PNC elections.

Endnotes

- 1 The Palestinian National Charter is also referred to as the Palestinian National Covenant and the Fundamental Law is also known as the Basic Law.
- 2 *Addustour* (Jordan), 2 February 2006.
- 3 See statements by Salim Zanoun and Abdul Raouf al-Alami in *al-Ghad*, (Jordan), 12 May 2006, and by Tayseer Kabaa in the same newspaper on 28 July 2005.
- 4 Shakir al-Johari, 'Minutes of the PNC delegation's meeting with factions in Damascus', *al-Haqaiq*, 4 August 2005.
- 5 *Addustour*, 3 August 2005.
- 6 Shakir al-Johari, 'Minutes of the PNC delegation's meeting with factions in Damascus', *al-Haqaiq*, 4 August 2005.
- 7 People referred to as the '1948 Palestinians' are Palestinian citizens of Israel, who are sometimes called 'Arab Israelis', a term most of them find insulting. Many of those who belong to this group prefer to call themselves '1948 Palestinians' but feel it is not safe to do so inside the Israeli-occupied zones.
- 8 See, for example, *al-Ghad*, 28 July 2005.

CHAPTER 5

Towards a healthy relationship between the PLO and the Palestinian Authority

Ahmad Said Nufal

The West Bank and the Gaza Strip, which now house the institutions of the Palestinian Authority, were not under Israeli occupation in 1964 when the PLO was born. At its inception, the objective of the PLO was to liberate Palestinian territory occupied in 1948. Within a short period of time, and especially after the influx of Palestinian factions led by Fatah, the PLO managed to generate a spirit of resolve and resistance, and to revive the hope that these lands could be reclaimed. This was the case not only for Palestinians, but also for the broader Arab public whose morale was boosted in the wake of the 1967 war by increased Palestinian resistance.

As mentioned in previous chapters, The PLO became the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, speaking in their name, and participating in Arab and international conventions on their behalf. However, since the 1993 Oslo Accords, the PLO has been deliberately weakened and marginalised by the Palestinian Authority, as well as a variety of Arab and international interest groups. In other words, Palestinian, Arab and international interaction with the Palestinian Authority has taken place at the PLO's expense. At a time when the PLO continues to enjoy broad-based support among Palestinians in the diaspora, rampant corruption has tainted the Palestinian Authority. Palestinians revealed their lack of confidence in the Authority during the 2006 legislative elections. Those election results reflected the Palestinian people's desire to revamp the leadership of the Authority, as well as to restore the bond between PLO activities abroad (which are still under Fatah's control) and the Palestinian Authority – the presidency of which has been commandeered by Fatah, even though the government is run by Hamas.

Thus, in the wake of the 2006 legislative elections, two leaderships emerged: the leadership of the PLO and that of the Palestinian Authority

– a situation that has weakened both structures. The intermingling of the functions of the PLO presidency with those of the Palestinian Authority dates back to when the first prime minister of the Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, submitted his resignation to PLO president Yasser Arafat as a result of the latter's interference. The same thing happened with Abbas' successor, Ahmed Qurei, who repeatedly threatened to resign prior to Arafat's death.

Pressure from the USA and Israel forced Arafat to create a distinction between the functions of the Palestinian Authority and the leadership of the PLO. Arafat created this distinction under the pretext of reforming the Authority even though he was not keen to do so. Despite the gravity of the discord between the presidency of the PLO and the National Authority, it was categorised as an internal dispute confined to the ranks of Fatah. However, Hamas's victory in the 2006 legislative elections brought the problem of overlapping jurisdictions to the surface, thus necessitating a search for a solution that is capable of restoring a healthy and appropriate relationship between the PLO and the Palestinian Authority. Since Fatah dominates the PLO, and the Palestinian Authority is divided between its Fatah-run presidency and Hamas-led government (elected by Palestinians in the West bank and the Gaza Strip), problems have arisen with respect to clashing jurisdictions between: the PLO and the presidency; the Fatah-led PLO and Palestinian factions sidelined by the PLO; and between the PLO and Fatah.

Signs of disagreement between the Palestinian presidency and the Palestinian Authority emerged soon after the announcement of the outcome of the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections. The very next day, Abbas (as PLO president, president of the Palestinian Authority and a member of Fatah) declared that the affiliation of three security apparatuses (namely, the Preventive Security Force, the police and the civil defence force) would be relocated from the interior ministry of the Palestinian Authority to the office of his presidency. The Palestinian Legislative Council, whose term in office was due to expire on 13 February 2006, held an emergency session and decided to delegate authority to Abbas to establish the constitutional court and appoint its chief justice and member judges. Before this, the law had stipulated that the Legislative Council must endorse the formation of the constitutional court. Thus the Legislative Council was stripped of its authority in favour of the president. Abbas then issued another presidential decree appointing his Chief of Staff to the presidency, even

though, in 2003, he had requested that Arafat transfer this position out of the presidency and into the prime minister's office. Moreover, Abbas issued a presidential decree appointing a new secretary-general for the Legislative Council, supplanting the elected member who had held the position. Under the new system, the appointed secretary-general is in charge of all members of the Legislative Council, thereby preventing Hamas from initiating any alteration in the Council's composition.

In parallel with the decision taken by the (expired) Palestinian Legislative Council, a batch of decisions were passed by Qurei's caretaker government to immediately promote and appoint nineteen undersecretaries, all of whom were either members of, or loyal to, Fatah. Appointing these key staff (in addition to the tens of thousands of pro-Fatah employees already appointed on the basis of their political allegiances) ensured the authority of Fatah and the presidency over all the Palestinian ministries. On 24 March 2006, Abbas set up an authority to supervise border crossings headed by Saeb Erekat, thus stripping the government of one of its roles. Abbas then went on to install Rashid Abu Shbak as chief of national security without consulting with the government or the interior minister; this was in direct contradiction with bylaws that require the president of the Palestinian Authority to endorse the interior minister's nomination for this post.

All of these measures were designed to entrench Fatah's control over the Palestinian Authority's security apparatuses. On 20 April 2006, Abbas issued a decree annulling a decision taken by the interior minister (who had had the backing of the government) to establish a unit comprised of resistance fighters from all Palestinian factions to aid the police in addressing the deteriorating security conditions in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Abbas also revoked the decision appointing the founder of the Popular Resistance Committees, Jamal Abu Samhadana, as inspector-general for the interior ministry under the pretext that the government had no jurisdiction in this regard, and that only the president could take this decision. Having said this, the post of inspector-general of the interior was not invented by the present government; it was established by a former cabinet, and occupied by Samir Mashharawi when Mohammed Dahlan was serving as minister of state for security affairs in the cabinet then led by Mahmoud Abbas under Arafat's presidency. After Hamas's victory in the legislative elections, calls were made to restore the primacy of the PLO, which had been dominated by Fatah for years, and which excluded Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Now that Hamas was part of the Palestinian

Authority, Palestinians outside Fatah decided it was high time to end the systematic marginalisation of the PLO that had gone on for decades.

These developments underline the fundamental dysfunctionalities in the relationship between the PLO and the Palestinian Authority. It is, however, necessary to remedy this relationship, and prevent it from obstructing the Palestinian national cause.

Reforming the PLO

In 1988, Israel's foreign minister at the time, Shimon Peres, was asked whether Israel would ever recognise the PLO. Peres answered that this would be possible when the PLO ceased to act as an organisation for the liberation of Palestine. In real terms, this is exactly what happened. After signing the Oslo Accords in 1993 and amending the Palestinian national charter in 1998, the activities of the PLO were no longer directed towards the liberation of Palestine. If the PLO is to regain respect as a representative of the Palestinian people, both locally and abroad, it is vital that the organisation be rebuilt on new foundations.

At an official level, there is no link between Palestinians in the diaspora and the Palestinian Authority. The latter has jurisdiction only inside the Occupied Territory, even though the president of the Authority is also head of the PLO. Overlapping jurisdictions between the PLO and the Palestinian Authority must be brought to an end. That is, the head of the PLO should not be meeting Israeli officials and negotiating with them while PLO institutions overseas are opposed to this. Nor should the president of the Palestinian Authority – acting as head of the PLO – have been allowed to set up a Negotiations Affairs Department within the PLO (especially since the person appointed to the position had been minister of negotiations in the Palestinian Authority, and was shifted to this new position after Hamas was voted into office).

In addition, the PLO must continue to act as a general umbrella movement for organisations that support the Palestinian cause. This is a broader mandate than the one held by the Palestinian Authority, because the PLO represents the homeland, the state, the sense of belonging and the leaders of all Palestinians, both inside the Occupied Territory and abroad. On the other hand, the Palestinian Authority represents a mere 36 per cent of Palestinians, those living inside the Occupied Territory. The PLO represents the Palestinian people according to the stipulations of the Palestinian National Charter, whereby every Palestinian wherever

he or she may be found is a member of the PLO. By no stretch of the imagination can we argue that every Palestinian is a member of the Palestinian Authority. Article 8 of the Palestinian National Charter reads as follows:

The phase in their history, through which the Palestinian people are now living, is that of national struggle for the liberation of Palestine. Thus the conflicts among the Palestinian national forces are secondary, and should be ended for the sake of the basic conflict that exists between the forces of Zionism and colonialism on the one hand, and the Palestinian Arab people on the other. On this basis, the Palestinian masses, regardless of whether they are residing in the national homeland or in the diaspora, constitute – both the organisations and the individuals – one national front working for the retrieval of Palestine and its liberation through armed struggle.

The Palestinian Authority was established exclusively to represent Palestinians residing within the Occupied Territory, and is engaged in negotiations with the Israelis aimed at securing their withdrawal from territories occupied in 1967. Ironically, the PLO, which signed the Oslo Accords, was first to approve the notion of negotiating with Israel to evacuate land usurped in 1967, without obtaining a mandate for this from Palestinians in the diaspora. The Palestinian Central Council, a structure of the PLO, ordered the establishment of the Palestinian Authority at a meeting held between 10 and 12 October 1993 in Tunisia.

That resolution reads as follows:

- Firstly: the PLO executive committee is authorised to form the Palestinian National Authority Council during the interim period, comprised of a number of members of the executive committee from inside and beyond the homeland.
- Secondly: PLO chair Yasser Arafat is to act as head of the Palestinian National Authority Council.

The Palestinian Authority's own constitution affirms the PLO as its supreme reference, noting:

The birth of the Palestinian National Authority in the national homeland of Palestine, the land of their forefathers, comes within the context of continuous and vigorous struggle, during which the Palestinian people witnessed thousands of their precious children sacrificed as martyrs, injured persons and prisoners of war, all in order to achieve their people's

clear national rights, the foremost of which are the right of return, the right to self-determination and the right to establish an independent Palestinian state, with Jerusalem as the capital, under the leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization the sole, legitimate representative of the Arab Palestinian people wherever they exist.

However, the institutions of the PLO had absolutely no involvement in the settlement process, nor did the Palestinian Authority see the PLO as a supreme reference.

It is worth noting that among the factors in favour of reforming the PLO is that its institutions have been paralysed and deprived of their former functions. For example, scores of unqualified and extraneous members were added into its National Council until their number exceeded 750. At the Council's most recent meeting in April 1996, many articles from the Palestinian National Charter were annulled and others were amended. As noted in Chapter 4, the membership of the PLO's executive committee is in disarray with several members having passed away, one being held captive by Israel; others have resigned or do not have time to carry out the committee's functions. This goes against Article 14 of the PLO Fundamental Law, which stipulates that if a position in the executive committee is vacated between National Council meetings, new members should be appointed to replace them.

Since Hamas and Islamic Jihad are not represented in the PLO, all Palestinian groups (Islamist and nationalist) called for a meeting in Cairo on 15 March 2005 to discuss the revitalisation and restructuring of the PLO on foundations to be agreed upon by all parties. The aim was for the PLO to unite all Palestinian forces and factions, so that it can again play the role of the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. A committee comprising the head of the PNC, members of the PLO executive committee, general-secretaries of all Palestinian factions, and a group of independent national dignitaries was set up to determine these new foundations. The meetings were to be called into session by the chairperson of the executive committee.

At the same meeting, which was attended by leaders from Fatah, Hamas and other factions, it was agreed that dialogue should be the only means of interaction between Palestinian forces, that dialogue should be used to strengthen national unity, ensure that the use of arms in internal disputes was prohibited, and that the rights of Palestinian citizens were respected. It is interesting to note that prior to the 2005 legislative elections, Hamas had called for the resumption of the Cairo

meetings in order to reach an agreement regarding its entry into the PLO. Fatah and the presidency of the Palestinian Authority showed very little enthusiasm for this. The tables turned when Hamas won the election, and Fatah began to implore the Islamist group to join talks, and to revitalise the role of the PLO. Another factor at play was the 'Palestinian Prisoners Document', also known as the National Reconciliation Document, which urged the reformation of the PLO and the implementation of the terms agreed upon in the 2005 Cairo Declaration.

Thus, to rebuild the PLO and rectify its relationship with the Palestinian Authority, I would like to propose:

- Reasserting the fundamental principles of all aspects of the Palestinian cause is essential, as is a reprioritising of the tasks entrusted to the PLO. This reprioritisation should take into account the present reality of the Palestinian political system – including the increasing support for Hamas and the declining popularity of other Palestinian factions. The PLO must be affirmed as the organisation that reflects the will of the entire Palestinian people, both internally and abroad, in line with the stipulations of the PLO Charter. Given that some Palestinian factions with minimal or diminishing support continue to be represented in the PLO, it follows that elected representatives, including members of the highly popular Hamas and Islamic Jihad, which enjoy a laudable track record against the Zionist occupation, should be represented in both the PNC and in the PLO's executive committee. This proposal is in line with Article 4 of the Palestinian Charter, which gives every Palestinian the right to membership of the PLO. Accordingly, it is unacceptable to keep any Palestinian faction outside the framework of the PLO.
- Agreeing upon a joint programme that acts as a common factor between all active Palestinian factions, in proportion to each group's support on the ground. The Palestinian Authority was established under an agreement (the Oslo Accords) rejected by Hamas and Islamic Jihad – both groups initially refused to recognise the Authority; later they regarded the Accords as a *fait accompli* but refused to co-operate with it. Hamas then changed its position when it decided to run for the legislative elections and later took power. All Palestinian groups must agree on a joint programme or framework that underscores a set of common principles. This programme must not undermine the Palestinian people's right

of resistance to end the occupation, their right to establish an independent sovereign state with Jerusalem as its capital, the refugees' right to return and reclaim their properties. The common programme must also muster a national consensus satisfactory to all nationalist and Islamist Palestinian factions, to entrench the sense of Palestinian nationalism and overcome the problems hindering the Palestinian cause.

- Distributing PNC seats as follows: 300 seats for Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and 170 for those in the diaspora, putting the total number of PNC members at around 300. Members of the Palestinian Legislative Council would serve concurrently as PNC members within the Occupied Territory, and membership of all local PNCs would expire upon the election of a new Legislative Council. Members of the PLO executive committee, and key political and popular leaderships in Israeli prisons should all be seen as natural members of the PNC, and should not require screening via an election process. Free and fair elections should be held in areas of Palestinian presence in the diaspora to elect members of the PNC, and elected members of Palestinian professional associations and labour unions should all be considered members of the PNC given that the positions they occupy are based on popular consensus. Elections for the representatives of the Palestinian people should be conducted in proportion to their aspect ratios whereby one PNC member represents 25 000 Palestinians. Palestinians living abroad must remain involved in furthering the cause, and Palestinians in the diaspora must be allowed to participate and enrol in PLO institutions.
- Drafting a new charter for the PLO, based on the decisions of the elected majority within the PNC and the executive committee of the new PNC formed after Hamas and Islamic Jihad have been included in the PLO. This follows the precedent of amendments that were made to the Pan-Arab National Charter in 1968 after various armed factions were incorporated into the PLO. A new national charter must take into account the transformations of recent years and emphasise the fundamental principles of the Palestinian cause. Moreover, reforming the PLO will only be successful if a new charter is unanimously adopted and the articles and clauses previously omitted under 'unnatural circumstances' are reintroduced.
- Strengthening the PLO and its institutions such that it can devise policies, regulate action and mobilise Palestinian capability.

Strengthening the PLO will automatically reinforce the Palestinian Authority. The PLO will then rise to reoccupy its position as the supreme reference for the Palestinian cause, as was the case prior to the Oslo Accords.

- Separating the positions of president of the Palestinian Authority and chairperson of the PLO executive committee, and clearly identifying the jurisdiction and authority of (i) the presidency of the Palestinian Authority and the Palestinian Authority itself; and (ii) between the PLO's National Council and the Palestinian Authority's Legislative Council. To this end, the entanglements and confusions that exist between the various sovereign and government bodies must be resolved prior to the rebuilding of the PLO's institutions, and leadership and representative authorities given to the Palestinian Authority at the expense of the PLO must be withdrawn, in line with the 2005 Cairo Declaration.
- Ending the entanglement created by Arafat when he simultaneously acted as president of the Palestinian Authority, chairperson of the PLO, president of the Palestinian state and head of Fatah. Arafat was probably the only person capable of chairing a broad-based meeting with members of the PLO executive committee, members of the Palestinian Authority, members of Fatah and consultants to the Palestinian presidency, without the meeting being branded as being dominated by any of these institutions. His successor, however, is not able exercise this jurisdiction, not because of personal incapability but rather due to the emergence of Hamas as a new partner in power since the 2006 legislative elections. This makes it urgent to correct the relationship between the PLO and Palestinian Authority.

National interest necessitates that all Palestinian groups and factions agree on establishing natural and healthy relations between the Palestinian Authority and the PLO. If our intentions are clear and factional prejudices are cast aside, the commonalities between them largely outnumber points of discord because, at this critical junction, everyone is involved.

As things stand, the USA and Israel could potentially exploit the conflicting jurisdictions of the PLO and the Palestinian Authority to exert further pressures, and introduce measures to escalate infighting and jeopardise Palestinian national unity. Israel could also play on the differences to geographically sever ties between the PLO abroad,

the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, and the Authority in the Gaza Strip, prohibiting movement between them. This has happened before, during sessions of the Palestinian Legislative Council and at the national unity conference, thereby broadening the schisms and further fragmenting the Palestinian struggle. In this instance, divisions occurred not so much between the PLO and Palestinians abroad on the one hand and the Palestinian Authority inside the Occupied Territory on the other, but between Palestinians inside the Occupied Territory itself, that is between the Palestinian presidency in the West Bank and the Palestinian government in the Gaza Strip.

Part II Debate

*Moderated by Bayan Nuwayhed al-Hout
Professor of history at the Lebanese
University, Beirut*

Jawad al-Hamad, *director of the Middle East Studies Center in Jordan, and an expert in Palestinian studies*

It is quite possible to rebuild the PLO and restructure its representation to better reflect the balance of Palestinian powers at play. It is also possible to reach a quasi-unanimous agreement regarding fundamental Palestinian principles and to refuse to entertain partial agreement on core issues. There is however a problem with respect to marginalising Palestinians inside the Occupied Territory: when the PLO was operating from exile, the Occupied Territory was sidelined, and during the Madrid negotiations this marginalisation became obvious; after the inking of the Oslo Accords, it became systematic.

Ghabi Jamal, *journalist and activist*

I am not opposed to negotiating with Israel, but what programme are we negotiating on? We constantly blame Arab regimes and other international interest groups for our failures, and we fail to spot our own responsibility as Palestinians. Has the negotiations programme properly advanced our struggle? Today the incumbent government is being pressured into recognising Israel, but we haven't yet absorbed the lessons from Lebanon or Oslo. The PLO has proven incapable of steering our project towards the establishment of a Palestinian state.

Walid Muhammad Ali, *general manager of the Baheth Center for Strategic and Palestinian Studies in Beirut, Lebanon.*

On the question of the 1948 Palestinians, all they can do is hold their ground on the land of Palestine. There are many (Israeli) studies probing the means to minimise their presence, and we now have a golden opportunity to mark the third founding of the PLO. We require a national covenant that reflects a comprehensive nationalist programme in the

face of the Zionist entity, rather than the current charter, which mirrors the viewpoint of the dominant forces on the scene. The key point is that Palestine remains under occupation, and we continue to labour through a phase of national liberation that necessitates deploying a unified national front to lead this march; this front is the PLO. Armed struggle can be used in some areas to expel the occupation, and in such areas we must employ high levels of transparency. As for the task of the Palestinian Authority, the representation of internal Palestinians is now accomplished through the Legislative Council. Covert activity has ceased to exist, and representatives of Palestinians within the Occupied Territory have already been chosen, but elections can still be held in other areas, with the exception of Jordan.

Qasim Qasir, *editor-in-chief of Shu'un Janoubiyyah magazine and journalist for the Lebanese newspapers, Assafir and al-Mustaqbal*

No one is voicing Fatah's position; have all the endeavours of Abu Ammar and Fatah culminated in failure? Why haven't the changes that led up to the Oslo Accords been discussed? Our discussion has concentrated on the Legislative Council elections, which was a result of the Oslo Accords. Is it really still possible to claim that we demand a free Palestine from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea?

Saqr Abu Fakhr, *writer and researcher at the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies*

Despite its first official title, the Pan-Arab Palestinian Charter downplays the Arab dimension of the Palestinian issue in favour of the nationalist dimension. Palestinians are not authorised to draft a covenant for joint Arab action; a pan-Arab charter involves all Arabs, we must rectify its title to reflect that the document is a national covenant that is specific to Palestinians. On the other hand, any party operates within a given timeframe, after which, if it has not been able to accomplish its objectives, it can be deemed as being incapable of doing so. If we consider the PLO as a party or a faction, it is impossible to rebuild, but, if we consider it a form of constitutional succession by the Palestinian people, it can be restructured. In other words, the PLO should be considered as a homeland in exile.

Yasser Ali, *Palestinian activist*

How did the PLO arrive at such a heartless position? I believe the answer is more social than political: the PLO lived among the ranks of autocratic regimes, and eventually it has become a carbon copy of those regimes as it struggles to govern the Palestinian people without holding elections and devoid of sound administration. The dictatorial environment surrounding the PLO consecrated a patriarchal ideology, and the organisation became a tool in the hands of a few rather than an institutionally run entity. The revolution does not cancel out the hopes expressed when Mahmoud Abbas took over the presidency under a legal and administrative guise, but it soon transpired that Abbas was no less a dictator than Yasser Arafat.

Ahmad Khalifa, *researcher at the Institute for Palestine Studies and expert in Israeli studies*

There is a missing dimension to our debate: there have been attempts to build the PLO, and we need to understand why these have been doomed to failure. It is necessary to shed light on the most prominent problems at hand today, and the present reality points towards immense problems, most importantly: the relationship between the Palestinian Authority and the PLO. It may not be easy to revive the PLO; in fact, given the multifaceted obstacles facing the Palestinian leadership and people, reviving the PLO may take a very long time.

Abdullah Atwat, *Palestinian activist*

I was a young man when the PLO was established, and I vividly recall Ahmad al-Shuqayri saying at a ceremony in Saidon that elections would be organised to choose representatives of the Palestinian people in the PLO and its PNC. However, we never really discovered how these representatives were selected. After this, the National Charter was drafted; again by whom we couldn't say. We do not question the integrity of specific individuals, but when the PLO was formed there weren't any factions or parties; parties arrived later on and the PLO became a front for factions and parties, and no longer an organisation supporting the cause of liberation. We demand that the PLO reassume its role as a representative of the Palestinian people, whose members are brought into office via free elections that are supervised by neutral and honest entities, and not by parties or factions. Prior to rebuilding the PLO, we must first identify which fundamental principles are unchanging, and which are open to give and take.

Muhammad Tayseer al-Khatib, *head of the Isra' Studies Center in Beirut*

Political events and developments in Palestine have proven that calls for a Palestinian homeland for all Palestinians would be hampered by failure in many respects, including the settlement process. However, in reality, the public mood in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, Lebanese refugee camps, and among Palestinians elsewhere, supports the slogan, 'a Palestine that is a homeland for All Palestinians'. This is true regardless of the balance of power at any given time. There is always a difficult balance to strike between fundamental principles on the one hand, and the necessities of political activity. These fundamental principles must not restrain flexible political strategies, nor should fundamental principles be overridden to make way for such strategies. Successful liberation struggles manage to strike this balance, but unfortunately our cause has failed to develop such policies. Consequently, we find ourselves entangled in absolute failure that has brought us back to square one. However, I imagine that this setback can be used to mobilise a fresh start, and help us to capitalise on our previous experiences, using the model of trial and error.

Regarding the issue of the 1948 Palestinians mentioned by Qasim Qasir and others: there is no question that the 1948 Palestinians and their relation to the Palestinian cause must always be taken into account. I say this, not necessarily with respect to elections or their role in armed struggle, because this could have a highly detrimental effect, but the 1948 Palestinians must be present in our consciousness, our political movement, our vision and literature. They are an integral part of the Palestinian people and are one of the most formidable strengths of the Palestinian people.

The last point I would like to touch on is about elections. Elections seem to be the keyword in Lebanon and elsewhere. I believe that civil society organisations should begin to educate people regarding elections right now, and that these organisations should play a central role in creating popular non-partisan and non-organisational pressure vis-à-vis the revitalising and restructuring of the PLO on new foundations. Therefore elections are possible, but a catalyst is needed to spread public awareness. Thus far, our organisations have relied largely on mobilisation rather than on spreading awareness. In other words, we urge people to support a certain cause, but we fail to put sufficient effort into educating and persuading them, and this error has hampered the success of most Palestinian organisations.

Mohsen Moh'd Saleh, *general manager of al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies and Consultations, Beirut*

Some quick points on the issue of the 1948 Palestinians; in my opinion, the basic rule is that they should be initially treated as part of the Palestinian people. Accordingly, exceptions should not be made using decisions imposed on them from the outside, but they must be allowed to act as an essential component of the Palestinian fabric and decision-making. Technical issues can follow from here; whether they choose to participate in elections or not, symbolically or covertly, etc. I think this decision is for them to determine and shape.

With respect to statistics, and taking into account the correct observations of Saqr Abu Fakhr on the issue, there are scores of discrepancies. We benefitted from the 1997 Palestinian census, but grave problems surface when we are confronted with figures for Palestinians abroad, and some of the estimates published are disputable. There is the problem of recounting that we noted, which has lured Palestinian researchers into error time and again. For example, residents of Jerusalem are included when calculating the population for the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, but when the 1948 Palestinians are counted, they are reincorporated into Israeli censuses for Jerusalem. This problem is also evident when we consider the number of Palestinians in Lebanon, which is included in the number of Palestinian refugees in the diaspora who moved and settled in Europe, the USA and elsewhere. We are left with some approximate figures, which can be considered fairly accurate. The figure of 10 million by the end of 2005 might not be entirely accurate but it can be considered close enough.

Regarding elections and the PLO, let's agree on a basic rule: the PLO is a cover or an umbrella for the Palestinian people, but to avoid creating confusion and ambiguity we must separate the roles of certain orientations or factions in the PLO from the PLO itself. We agree that the separation of powers is a given, and that the rotation of power is also a given, and that events, changes and generations may come up with new results. These are all given. But the arrival of a new faction does not mean that the older ones should hang on to power. Any party voted into office must be prepared to change or be changed if its performance fails to gain the approval of the Palestinian people. We must sustain a dynamic state of mature interaction, and remain capable of changing our leadership as soon as the Palestinian people deems the leadership to be unable to fulfil its ambitions and aspirations.

The last point I would like to make is about members of the Legislative Council automatically being members of the PLO's National Council, this was stated in the charter of 1995 and applied to the elections of 1996. However, I want to draw your attention to an important point: Law 9 passed in June 2005, and endorsed by the Legislative Council cancelled all articles linking the two bodies. The explanatory memorandum (and the clauses outlining the membership of both houses) is absent from the text of the legislation. As noted in Chapter 4, Salim Zanoun expressed shock when he learned about this, but even more surprising is that, according to Zanoun himself (who told this to Jordan's *Addustour* newspaper on 14 February 2006), he heard about this change *six months* after the law was amended, via an Israeli journalist from the *Jerusalem Post*. In addition, Zanoun reveals that when he told Abbas, the latter was enraged, and expressed surprise and anger. Asked how he could sign an amendment and then be surprised, Abbas replied that he was tricked into signing it. Is it possible to say that law enforcement was done surreptitiously? And that we held elections based on a law that was passed by trickery? This is unacceptable. The Authority is responsible for this fiasco, and its general orientation has been geared towards neutralising and weakening the PNC. Of course, Mahmoud Abbas has since issued a presidential decree deeming members of the Legislative Council to automatically be members of the PNC, but this does not change the legal basis upon which the last elected Legislative Council was established.

Ahmad Said Nufal, *professor of political science, Yarmouk University, Jordan*

I want to review the issue of overlapping jurisdiction between the leadership structures of the PLO and the Palestinian Authority. For now, the PLO has a single chairmanship while the Palestinian Authority has two: the presidency in Ramallah and the government in Gaza. The key point is that certain practices by the presidency in Ramallah are hindering the government's activities in Gaza. This issue must be decisively resolved. Nafez Abu Hasna made an important point about the need for a separation between the Palestinian Authority and the position of chairperson of the PLO. We know that the Palestinian Central Council adopted a decision on 1 October 1993 to form the Palestinian Authority, and that President Arafat would head the Palestinian Authority. To revoke this decision, the Palestinian Central Council or the PNC must make a decision – in other words, no single individual has the right to revoke this decision. The decision passed by

the Palestinian Central Council in 1993 was clear. The jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority's presidency must be disengaged from that of the Palestinian government, and the same goes for Fatah and Hamas.

The next issue is regarding the question put forward by Saqr Abu Fakhr with respect to the pan-Arab Palestinian Charter. In reality, a number of articles in the pan-Arab charter and the Palestinian National Charter have been amended in the past, because of a certain dominant organisation with a pan-Arab approach (and this is not malicious). Not only was there an attempt to rebrand the national charter as a pan-Arab charter, but some articles in the Palestinian national charter were changed.

Finally, I would like to make an important point regarding the 1948 Palestinians, who consider themselves an integral part of the Palestinian people and thus want to contribute to the Palestinian cause. We from the outside tell them: 'No, stay put and struggle for your own issues', thus ignoring the sea of Palestinian personalities and parties that are unafraid of the Israeli occupation and wish to partake in the Palestinian struggle. Those of us outside the 1948 Occupied Territory say, 'No, confine yourselves to the inside, struggle against racial discrimination, and to remove the restrictions placed on you by the Israeli government'. Conversely, it is said that the Israeli government is preparing to pass a law to consider every Jewish citizen in the world a citizen of the state of Israel. That is, 13 million Jews abroad could end up being counted as Israeli citizens, while we bicker with the 1948 Palestinians – who are a part of the Palestinian people – telling them that they belong to a different system. How can this be? We belong to the same cause.

PART III



CHAPTER 6

The PLO and endeavours to forge Palestinian national unity

Munir Shafiq

Perhaps it is useful to conduct a quick review of the notion of Palestinian dialogue and national unity since the 1964 convention up to the present. My aim is to plot the relevant tendencies and trends along the general curve of Palestinian dialogue and national unity, so that we may benefit from the past as we attempt to foster dialogue and respond to calls for Palestinian national unity.

First, however, it is important to note that no Palestinian organisation, faction or movement deals with the question of national dialogue and unity as an objective in and of itself. The notion is always subject to other considerations pertaining to political and intellectual traditions or, in some cases, to an organisation's position and role, or its standpoint on past disputes linked to Arab discord, etc. Therefore, no one has the right, or sufficient qualification, to speak on behalf of anyone but themselves on this particular subject.

When the PLO was born, it mimicked Egyptian and Algerian models, whereby individuals, rather than organisations, movements or parties pledged allegiance to national unity. This remained the case until Fatah took over the leadership of the PLO in 1968. Fatah initially welcomed the formation of the PLO, and some Fatah members participated in the PLO's first convention. But as a movement, Fatah remained outside the PLO, preferring to run its own independent programme of activities. By January 1965, Fatah had decided to break ranks with the PLO entirely, and unilaterally declared armed struggle against the Israeli occupation. In effect, this pulled the carpet out from under the PLO, and the organisation, then led by Ahmad al-Shuqayri, fractured badly as a result. Fatah had its reasons for going against the PLO, believing that its political and military strategy was best suited to furthering the Palestinian cause, which it considered a precondition for national unity. For Fatah, the PLO could 'take it or leave it'.

The number of factions advocating armed struggle soon increased, and several of these initiated painstaking dialogues with Fatah to find common ground or agree on joint programmes. Fatah then developed a slogan to articulate its position on these talks, saying: 'Let us meet on the battleground', implying that national unity was more likely to be secured in the struggle against the enemy than at a negotiating table.

The following stage saw Fatah gain control of the PLO's leadership structure.¹ Fundamental changes were soon made, turning the organisation into a broad umbrella grouping for all Palestinian movements, organisations, professional associations, unions and individuals. Under this umbrella body, the role of the armed factions, led by Fatah, gained momentum in determining PLO policies, including on the issue of Palestinian national unity. The question of dialogue came to the fore whenever a new development occurred. Factions sought to express the concept of national unity by holding meetings and discussions, but without organically linking this concept to the question of reaching national unity based on an assessment of the various societal forces at play. From this point on, the road to Palestinian national unity had to navigate through the agreements reached by various factions, rather than being based on popular or societal support. It was assumed that the latter would automatically occur if the former was achieved, but this overlooked the complex interplay of relations between political powers and civil society. Essentially, independent and non-politicised forces and organisations were gradually sidelined.

Practically speaking, what governed so-called Palestinian national unity under the PLO's umbrella was membership of the PLO, as well as participation in its national councils and executive committee. However, various factions always overtly opposed reaching agreement on a basic programme that would be acceptable to all factions, and some even lobbied against this. This was even true of the relationship between various groups vis-à-vis the Palestinian National Charter.

If we review Fatah's literature, or that of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command, the Palestinian Arab Front, as-Sa'iqa (the Syrian-controlled Ba'athist faction), or the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, we find that all of these groups issued demands, rhetoric and slogans that went beyond the wording of the national charter. Many will recall the debate surrounding the so-called 'Palestinian democratic state', which became bogged down by whether this would be a 'Palestinian socialist state' led by the proletariat, or an 'Arab state'. Meanwhile, Fatah was accused of being

'right-wing', 'opportunist' 'backward-looking', etc., while similarly abusive accusations were levelled against various other leaders.

All this took place while channels for dialogue were supposedly open, and all were ostensibly attempting to achieve 'national unity' or, to be more specific, to achieve what the PLO and the higher echelons of its leadership structures considered unity to be. In other words, national unity was not generally regarded as something one should 'commit' to, nor was it seen as important to abide by a basic programme, in the way that revolutionary movements in Algeria, Syria, Egypt, Iraq, Vietnam or China had done. Instead, unity and dialogue coexisted with discord and slander. No Palestinian faction was willing to commit to anything beyond or against its own ideology or programme, even though all the factions always appeared keen to embrace dialogue and attend talks under the slogan of 'Palestinian national unity'.

Of course the Palestinians' unique understanding of 'national unity' arises from the wide disparities between Palestinians in the diaspora, the fragmented nature of the Arab condition, as well as the meddling of Arab and other nations in internal Palestinian affairs. Consequently, all solutions and formulas previously used by Arab and other peoples to address similar problems were seen as being inapplicable to the Palestinian case. Moreover, those advocating such solutions often found themselves confounded and stopped in their tracks while Palestinians muddled through times of chaos and contradiction. The uniqueness of the situation made relations in the Palestinian arena extremely intricate. On the one hand, the National Charter existed, and the PNC issued communiqués, programmes and decisions. On the other hand, every faction and – in some cases, every leader – followed their own overtly independent policies and practices, which almost always diverged from the Charter or the PNC's decisions to varying degrees. Dialogue and participation in the PNC, the executive committee, or other joint leadership structures continued, but relations between different parties remained volatile and accusatory.

In 1974, the Interim or Ten-Point Programme was covertly introduced by Fatah under the guise of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine. This tactic was adopted to help legitimise the programme, despite that fact that the ten points fundamentally opposed Fatah's original ideology, contradicted the National Charter, as well as decisions passed by previous PNCs, and threatened inter-factional and Arab-Palestinian relations. Indeed, the introduction of the Ten-Point Programme accurately illustrates the trends that characterised inter-

Palestinian dialogue, Palestinian national unity and the varying degrees of commitment to the National Charter and a joint programme.

In fact, the introduction of the Ten-Point Programme led to the birth of a new opposition front, led by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and it appears to have divided the Palestinian scene even more sharply than it has been before. Yet, even the new opposition front considered the withdrawal of its representatives from the PLO's executive committee as a 'freezing' of their membership, rather than as leaving the PLO permanently.

Meanwhile, the leadership of the PLO tried to placate the opposition – or this or that faction – by encouraging them to reactivate their membership of the executive committee, regardless of their opposition to the Ten Point Programme. In plain terms, the leading Palestinian factions were willing to appear united, even though they could reach no agreement or common understanding at the most basic level. This paradoxical situation has since become the norm vis-à-vis Palestinian national unity, and it was particularly prevalent during the 1970s and 1980s.

Essentially, intra-Palestinian attitudes in relation to experiences of national unity, dialogue and agreement on a common programme have been informed by this trend. For example, Fatah leaders often act outside the mandates officially endorsed by the PNC; that is, Fatah's policies have often transgressed decisions passed by the PNC. Thus PNC decisions, which should represent the end point of a discussion, instead often turn into a starting point for yet more debates. Disputes often run rife between PNC meetings, and tend to give rise to a series of complex bargaining strategies aimed at forcing the PNC to announce a new decision that can serve as the operating guideline for the following period. Thus if any new decision was not in tune with Fatah's policies, a new cycle of brawling would break out against the PLO's official policies. Fatah would, in turn, be accused of breaking ranks with PNC decisions. This has been the case in every period between PNC meetings, and, at times, even between meetings of the PLO's executive committee.

To sum up then, all parties have tried to develop their policies, and enforce them on the ground, within a framework of so-called national unity, while neglecting both the National Charter and decisions they had previously agreed to. All parties have been keen on preserving the slogan of 'national unity', as long as this did not interfere with their own political views or standpoints, and on condition that a broad

margin for independent action remained secure. Even after the Ten-Point Programme was proposed, slogans such as ‘the liberation of Palestine’ and ‘fighting the enemy’ remained popular. Thus it can be argued that what most parties really had in common was a willingness to try and keep intra-Palestinian differences below the threshold of actual infighting, while calling for national unity and expressing their enthusiasm for further dialogue.

After the Oslo Accords were signed, and the Palestinian Authority was established in parts of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the scene inside Palestine shifted qualitatively. However, this development had a negligible effect on Palestinians in the diaspora. It also did little to change matters in the Arab world or beyond, nor did it change the nature of either the Zionist enemy or the Palestinian cause. The rise of the Palestinian Authority did not halt the encroachment of Zionist occupation; it simply kept the larger portion of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip under occupation, and it exacerbated issues relating to Jerusalem, Israeli settlements and Palestinian refugees.

These conclusions about the state of Palestinian national unity and dialogue are – generally speaking – still valid. Perhaps the first lesson to learn is that national unity and dialogue need not be related to the signing of the Oslo Accords, the policies of the Palestinian Authority, or the decisions of the PLO’s executive committee. On the other hand, it might be wise not to set a precondition that conciliatory discussions depend on the Palestinian Authority recanting its position on the Oslo Accords or undoing measures implemented since the Accords were signed. If the issue of the Oslo Accords has to be brought under the spotlight – as it is every day – then parties engaged in the talks should at least do so on the basis of the common ground that exists between them or a basic level of agreement that is capable of sustaining Palestinian national unity one way or another. It is crucial that we air our differences and disputes within a framework that precludes infighting, repression and boycotting. It is even more important that we stand united in the face of the fundamental challenges threatening Jerusalem and the Palestinian cause as a whole.

To answer some of the questions facing us at this stage of the PLO’s development, two points need to be emphasised:

- The first point is that the trait discussed above, whereby opposition groups and PLO members fail to adhere to charters, programmes and day-to-day policies, while simultaneously asserting that

national unity is secure under the PLO umbrella (regardless of prevailing conditions, or of accusations and counter accusations being exchanged – including ‘right-wing’, ‘autocratic’, ‘complicit’ ‘negligent’, ‘childishly left-wing’ or ‘sabotaging’) does not derive from a lack of understanding of the role of national fronts or of the importance of national unity. It arises out of the reality of the Palestinian diaspora and Arab fragmentation, from the nature of our organisations and factions, as well as our programmes and policies.

- Accordingly, relations between Palestinian parties have usually been congruent with the reality on the ground. This complicated and fragmented formula has been seen as the only workable one, both by Fatah and its leadership and by the other factions. The reason for this is that Fatah’s notion of adherence to ‘backbone leadership’ mimics the allegiance pledged by members of Vietnam’s National Liberation Front, led by the strict Vietnamese Communist Party, which allowed little margin for independent action from within the ranks of its affiliates.
- Having said this, although everyone complained, most were satisfied with the ‘formula’. Anyone who thinks of the PLO as similar to the (Egyptian) Socialist Union, or the Algerian or Vietnamese Liberation Fronts, or believes that the PLO rose to power through majority support, adherence to a basic programme, or other PNC decisions, is deluded. The history of the PLO, and the present state of the organisation, makes this clear. However, proponents of such views use them to try to stifle groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, and to try and make them toe the political line adopted by the PLO. Proponents of this logic tend to forget that they, too, are among those calling for the restructuring and revitalising of the PLO, and for the reform of its PNC by adding Hamas and Islamic Jihad to its membership if agreement can be reached on this.
- How is it that proponents of these views wish to impose conditions on Hamas that they themselves do not abide by, however much they ostensibly and temporarily claim to do so? For example, the PLO leadership has never committed itself to abiding by decisions passed by the PNC or the Palestinian Central Council at any critical juncture. PLO leaders have invariably felt free to do as they please, including negotiating agreements and referring to the PNC in retrospect or for ratification. This is also true of the decisions of the Central Council regarding participation at the Geneva conference,

where Fatah leaders went ahead with the Oslo Accords, which are separated from any form of Palestinian consensus by a sea of discord.

- If we really wish to rebuild and revitalise the PLO so that it can assume its responsibilities, include Hamas and the Islamic Jihad in its membership, and bridge the gap between the advocates and opponents of the Oslo Accords, the road we have to follow runs through open and positive dialogue. It does not include preconditions that have never governed relations between the PLO factions in the past. However, if our goal is to transform the PLO into another battlefield on which we hammer out our political differences, then there is little point in rebuilding the PLO or in trying to learn from its experiences to date.
- The second point that must be emphasised is that no political programme yet enjoys the support of all the resistance factions or all the factions in the PLO. Was there agreement on the Oslo Accords 'programme' and subsequent course of action? Is there agreement on Fatah's 'exclusive negotiations' strategy? Is there agreement on which 'roadmap' offers a 'programme' for negotiations? No. Instead there are disagreements on all these issues, and not simply between the PLO factions on the one hand and Hamas and Islamic Jihad on the other, but also between the PLO factions themselves, and perhaps even within each faction. In other words, we must embark on a process of identifying the best programme to adopt during the current period. The PLO cannot begin with a programme and expect Hamas and Islamic Jihad to give this the nod.

The only possible way forward, that precludes unprincipled bargaining by any party or a reversion to ambiguous formulas such as the Ten Point Programme, is what can be called the 'final solution' or 'unilateral disengagement'. This can be summed up as: demolishing the wall, dismantling settlements, salvaging Jerusalem along with other Islamic and Christian holy sites, prohibiting settlements in the strategically important al-Aghwar area in the Jordan Valley, repelling the Israeli occupation beyond the 1949 armistice agreement's lines (or beyond the borders established on 5 June 5 1967), and asserting the right of return for Palestinian refugees. If these actions can be carried out, the Palestinian state can be established on independent, liberated territory, leaving the door open for negotiations around issues that become known because of what is accomplished by this programme.

Once we have determined the objectives of a programme, we have to rely on strategies and tactics, that is, the means of struggle, to achieve these objectives. In this regard, we need to work out the most appropriate forms of resistance to employ at the Palestinian, Arab, Islamic and international levels. This includes reaching agreement on a unified leadership, such as a follow-up committee internally and abroad.

No one can claim to be in disagreement with the unilateral disengagement programme outlined above, nor can anyone claim that it belongs to any particular faction, or that any faction is seeking to impose it on the others. It reflects the common factors uniting the Palestinian people, and it responds directly to the threats that are jeopardising our existence at this crucial moment in our history. In addition, this programme preserves the right of each faction to add elements that reflect their particular identities or organisational programmes. However, factions must refrain from imposing their particular agendas on others if national unity is to be upheld, and if a common response is to be found to the challenges involved in rebuilding and revitalising the PLO. This includes redefining its relationship with the Palestinian Authority, such that the PLO leads the Authority, and not vice versa.

Endnotes

- 1 Fatah joined the PLO in 1967, and took over the leadership in 1969, when Yasser Arafat, one of Fatah's founding members, was made PLO chairperson.

CHAPTER 7

The PLO's planning and research centres Academic freedom and academic research

Saqr Abu Fakhr

Soon after the birth of the PLO in 1964, the organisation's leaders began to establish a host of think tanks to carry out scientific research, and to assist in the ongoing struggle against Zionism and Israel. After Fatah launched the armed struggle on 1 June 1968, the Palestinian nationalist movement crystallised further. No longer merely a gathering of opposition groups, the PLO became a comprehensive nationalist organisation that expressed the aspirations of almost all Palestinian people, wherever they may be.¹

A range of important media and scientific foundations grew out of the movement, all making valuable contributions. Palestinians were pioneers in this regard. The first research centres were established in Lebanon, when the PLO established the Institute for Palestine Studies in Beirut as well as several other research and planning centres. The scholars and writers employed in these centres laboured diligently to highlight the Palestinian issue in the Arab world, in Europe and the USA. They eventually succeeded in raising awareness about the Palestinian cause among the international media and within universities and scholarly forums worldwide. A set of brilliant Palestinian and Arab scholars devoted themselves to furthering the Palestinian cause and the Arab renaissance. Undoubtedly, contemporary Arab thought is indebted to the likes of Fayez Sayegh, Yousef Sayegh, Anis Sayegh, Walid al-Khalidi, Constantine Zureiq, Nabih Amin Faris, Burhan Dajani, Samy Hadrawi, Edmond Rabat, and many others.

The focus of this chapter

The PLO's research and planning centres, the Institute for Palestine Studies, those involved in compiling the *Encyclopaedia of the Palestinians*, SAMED (the Palestine Martyrs' Works Society), and the Arab Studies

Society of Jerusalem (Orient House), are among the more renowned think tanks and research organisations linked to the Palestinian nationalist movement. I will restrict my focus here to the PLO's research and planning centres, because, unlike the other centres, they were run by the PLO.

It is perhaps helpful to clarify that the Institute for Palestine Studies has never been directly affiliated with the PLO – rather, it is a Lebanese foundation, of Arab composition and Palestinian in orientation. Similarly, SAMED is an independent foundation launched in 1969 as an offshoot of Fatah, not the PLO; and those who compile the *Encyclopaedia of the Palestinians* formed an independent agency by agreement between the PLO and Arab League's Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organisation (ALESCO) in 1974. While the PLO retains a nominal link with the *Encyclopaedia*, the publication has been independent since its inception, and all administrative and fiscal decisions are made by ALESCO's managing director rather than by the chair of the PLO executive committee. The same applies to the Arab Studies Society of Jerusalem, which has elements from the PLO and Fatah to thank for its founding in 1980, but which has never officially been subject to the PLO's organisational hierarchy.

Palestinian research

The need for Palestinian research emerged in the second half of the 1950s, when it became pressing and crucial to explain the Nakba. It is noteworthy that the Arab Nationalist Movement and Fatah were founded in 1956 and 1959 respectively. However, although sparked by an elite group of Arab and Palestinian pioneers, the notion of a research centre did not fully crystallise until 1962, when efforts were made to establish the Institute for Palestine Studies. Those efforts bore fruit a year later, and the Institute was founded in 1963. As renowned historian, Nabih Amin Faris, has repeatedly stressed, it was not skills or acumen that Arabs and Palestinians lacked. What they needed was the time to spend behind library desks conducting research and deriving conclusions from their analyses, prior to making their findings available to decision makers, intellectuals, politicians and the media.

In 1966, the PLO Research Centre was set up, and in 1968, the Planning Centre was established. These two centres played a major role in promoting the publication of independent reports, and were relatively free to conduct their own research programmes. But a

pressing question remains: to what extent were the Research Centre and the Planning Centre independent of the PLO's political line?

The Research and Planning Centres were structurally affiliated with the PLO and operated under the direct supervision of its chairperson. Yet both centres conducted largely free and independent research and had publishing agendas that were unmatched anywhere in the Arab world at the time. This may be linked to the fact that the two centres were located away from Palestinian political leadership, which (in the late 1960s) was located in Amman. In other words, physical distance from the PLO's leadership may have limited political interference with the day-to-day research and planning conducted by the centres. Another contributing factor was that the principles of intellectual liberty and freedom of expression are seen as sacred in Lebanon, and this may well have helped staff at the centres to fend off any attempts at political interference in their operations.

To my knowledge, the Research Centre and the Planning Centre, functioned under acceptable conditions and remained free of political meddling until 1974, even though they were subject to the authority of the chairperson of the PLO. In 1974, the infamous fissure occurred over whether to accept or reject the Ten-Point Programme. Then the Lebanese war began, and major transformations set in. Gradually, every intellectual, media or documentary foundation became immersed in covering the war, gradually turning their backs on academic research until the war was about to end in 1982.

However, the decline of Palestinian research was not linked solely to the Lebanese war, or to interventions from the political leadership. In my view, the cultural milieu of the Palestinian revolution was undeveloped in some respects. Many of its revolutionaries had little respect for scientific degrees and academic qualifications. Many scoffed at the idea of academic research saying: 'The Jews have usurped Palestine and we want to liberate it. That's all there is to it. Why science? Why philosophy? What is it you search for? What good are certificates? Tomorrow we will liberate Palestine and that is sufficient. We are either warriors or martyrs.'

In the midst of the day-to-day challenges and difficulties of the struggle, increasing credence was given to the slogan (often attributed to Mao Zedong), 'All political power comes from the barrel of a gun'. This became a key motto for a host of unimaginative and intransigent players on the Palestinian political stage. Moreover, some used it to contrive the new slogan, 'Culture comes from the barrel of a rifle'.

Consequently, a new type of literature, rooted in guns, was born, but very little of it survives today. Similarly, it was said that a guard in a boot camp was more useful than a researcher at the Institute of Palestine Studies. In 1982, it transpired that the 'guards watching over the camp' had, in fact, 'abandoned their posts', and researchers proved to be the last line of defence for the Palestinian people during the wars that took place from 1985 to 1987.

However, we must not forget that some Palestinian intellectuals also colluded with the political leadership, blocking independent critical thought and disciplined scholarship. Intellectuals who submit to political power can be found in every society. Generally, such individuals are incapable of creative production; their only skill is their ability to cajole the sultans and live off their grants. Other intellectuals specialise in expressing their personal experience via poetry, art or other means, and then we have those independent and critical intellectuals who traditionally have had very little say in Palestinian politics.

Within this turbulent milieu, Palestinian researchers, nevertheless, built institutions and published the results of their findings. The importance of the studies and research conducted by Palestinian think tanks cannot be overemphasised. The research and planning centres are a case in point.

The Research Centre

The idea of the Research Centre was born in the mind of Fayez Sayegh, before becoming a reality in the midst of momentous events, such as the founding of the Palestine Liberation Army, and the firing of the first bullet by Fatah. From its inception, the Research Centre was both devoted to research and oriented towards the struggle. In its first decade, the centre expanded from a tiny apartment to a six-storey building in the prestigious suburb of Ras Beirut.² This growth and development took place under Anis Sayegh, who became director of the centre in 1966. During this period, the centre published 351 books,³ and published a magazine called *Shu'oon Falasteeniyyah* (Palestinian Affairs) from 1971, which became one of the most prominent Arab journals of the 1970s.

Early on, Anis Sayegh strove to promote the Research Centre as a serious and independent scientific think tank, unaligned with any specific political grouping. That is, despite the fact that it was a creation of the PLO, the centre remained loyal to the broader Palestinian cause. In the many years that have since elapsed, I have often wondered

whether the Research Centre would have accomplished as much as it did, had it not been able to operate in a largely free and independent atmosphere. Despite some political interference, Yasser Arafat, who led the PLO from 1969, was highly tolerant of the centre. This was true even though the centre was often seen as disloyal towards Arafat, and closer to the former PLO leader, Ahmad al-Shuqayri.

Suspicion surrounded the centre when Arafat began to suspect that Anis Sayegh's loyalties lay first with al-Shuqayri, then with Egypt under Nasser, and later with Syria.⁴ These concerns never fully dissipated for Arafat, yet Sayegh remained fearless in the face of betrayals by other intellectuals. Sayegh proved that he could not be reined in, and, on the whole, he managed to protect the Research Centre, and to present a dignified image for Palestinian research. It can therefore be argued that, in some respects, the leadership of the PLO grew to respect the role of scientific research, and learned to tolerate opinions that differed from their own.

In his memoirs, *Anis Sayegh on Anis Sayegh*,⁵ the author dedicated a special chapter to his turbulent relationship with Arafat from which an important conclusion can be drawn: that is, when attempting to interfere with the work of the Centre, Arafat often backed down, and Sayegh tended to emerge victorious from such encounters. Surely this counts in Arafat's favour?

It is a given that the PLO intervenes in the affairs of its affiliates; this cannot be denied. The PLO bears the ultimate responsibility for the actions of its affiliates in real, financial, administrative and political terms. In the case of the Research Centre, however, it would have been genuinely inappropriate for the PLO to attempt to influence its research at the expense of the Palestinian cause. Did the PLO interfere in such a manner? Apparently, it is impossible to find unequivocal evidence to answer this question, but the facts at hand suggest that the PLO allowed the centre a wide margin of liberty in their research activities.

Vulgar forms of interference did occasionally come from hotheaded secretary-generals of certain factions. In his memoirs, Anis Sayegh describes how he received a death threat for mourning the death of a young man who had worked at the Research Centre. It later transpired that the young man had been executed by his own organisation for insubordination.⁶ Sayegh noted that, at the time, his enemies told him, 'If Israel fails to kill you, we could easily succeed'.

The imams of various mosques accused the Research Centre of treason and heresy when its journal published a series of articles

distinguishing Judaism from Zionism. In a similar incident, the Research Centre was harassed by the Lebanese Catholic Church after the Centre reported that Bishop Hakim, then bishop (and later archbishop) of Haifa and Galilee, had called on Palestinian workers to join Israel's trade union federation, the Histadrut, urging them to claim their rights through the Israeli union. I can vouch for the fact that this incident is true.

Another story is that of Sadiq Jalal al-Azm: apparently Yasser Arafat wanted the Research Centre to fire this researcher, but he remained employed (albeit in a new role) following an order from Anis Sayegh.⁷ Towards the end of his tenure, and just before his resignation, Sayegh reported that he had once hung up the telephone while Yasser Arafat was apologising to him. Despite this, not a single leader of Fatah or the PLO ever threatened Sayegh. It is possible, however, that had Sayegh hung up while talking to a low-ranking officer from any given faction, the Research Centre would have been besieged, and Sayegh might well have been thrown into jail.⁸

The Planning Centre

The Planning Centre was established on 18 September 1968⁹ by Yousef Sayegh, with Nabil Shaath, Munir Shafiq and Sulafa Hijjawi. The centre was founded with the objective of devising political, diplomatic, financial, cultural and military plans for the PLO, and converting these plans into comprehensive strategies. Indeed, the centre had already devised a comprehensive plan for the Palestinian media, and a strategic plan for the Palestinian revolution. The Planning Centre's *modus operandi* involved forming specialised working groups made up of the centre's own staff and other experts.

The Planning Centre made a significant contribution by introducing the need for long-term planning to some Palestinian leaders, and raising awareness of important strategic issues. The political reports issued periodically by the centre's strategic studies department played a key role in fostering discussions among the Palestinian forces, and in crystallising an innovative level of political discourse. The Centre's Strategic Studies department published prolifically, as did its Occupied Territory department, its Technical department, and its Pedagogical Planning department. These reports were sent to the Palestinian political leadership and distributed among related agencies and experts in each field.¹⁰

I believe that the Planning Centre played a critical role in developing awareness; firstly, about pedagogical and military issues, and, secondly, about political and administrative issues. However, the composition of its staff, its daily link with the political leadership, and the fact that it limited its functions to providing the political leadership with feedback on certain issues (which was, nonetheless, an important role), meant that the centre was gradually transformed into a kind of secretariat to the PLO's leadership. It was even assigned the role of drafting reports, attending to correspondence and writing political speeches.¹¹

The academic and/or political affiliations of the staff working at the Planning Centre during the Lebanese war, and the fact that some staff members were actually engaged in fighting the war, occasionally prevented them from completing certain projects. For instance, when the PLO was asked to accept UN Resolution 242, Arafat instructed the centre to analyse this proposal. Munir Shafiq formed a preliminary working group for this purpose, and I was appointed as a member of the group. What happened next was a disgrace. At the very first meeting, several people launched tirades against the 'principle' of the matter; that is, it was argued that accepting the resolution should not even be open for discussion. Munir Shafiq worked diligently to get the team to co-operate, encouraging the group to discuss the issue before arriving at conclusions, and arguing that we might be able to support an amended version of the resolution. However, the responses of some researchers were so thuggish that they ultimately blocked any rational investigation of the issue. Eventually, it emerged that UN Security Council and General Assembly communiqués could not be amended in any way, but that we could work towards drafting a new resolution.

This is but one example of obstructive intellectuals, not politicians, preventing real work from being done. By allowing the discussion, the leadership showed that they were willing to be flexible on the issue, but the researchers were driven more by their own political views than by the requirements of intellectual rigour.

However, the opposite was also true at times. One blatant example of this occurred in early 1970, when the Planning Centre completed its 'Comprehensive Strategic Plan for the Palestinian Revolution', a report that combined the views of scores of experts, researchers, intellectuals and politicians. The centre printed a very limited number of copies, and sent them under utmost secrecy to the PLO leadership in Amman. When no one from the leadership called to discuss the report, the Centre's director, Yousef Sayegh, travelled to Amman to look into the

matter. On arrival he discovered a copy of the 'strictly confidential' report lying around at the PLO headquarters, with tea and sugar stains on its cover. Sayegh turned around and headed back to Beirut. Thus the concerted efforts of a large group of respected researchers were turned into a tea tray, even though the report's front cover had been clearly marked as 'strictly confidential'.

Epilogue

Despite such travesties, both the Research Centre and the Planning Centre made brilliant contributions of undeniable importance. Both centres did their finest work during the first ten years of their existence. In my view, the centres were closed primarily because of the outbreak of the Lebanese war, rather than because of the complacency or interference of the political leadership.

The operational climate during wartime is seldom conducive to independent research and planning. Several highly qualified staff members did not cope well with the tumultuous wartime conditions, and fled to seek posts at PLO stations outside Lebanon.

But, if PLO institutions failed to entrench solid foundations for academic research, and were unable to protect the institutions that existed in the 1970s,¹² it must also be acknowledged that other organisations, which received millions of dollars in aid from Iraq, Libya and Algeria, and made repeated attempts, have failed to establish a single reputable research centre.

Endnotes

- 1 The Higher Arab Committee, led by Hajj Amin al-Husayni, opposed the PLO; the Arab Nationalist Movement expressed temporary reservations, even though the PLO was aligned with President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt; and the anti-Nasser Syrian Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party considered the PLO to be an instrument used by Nasser.
- 2 The Research Centre started off with twelve employees and three book cabinets. In 1976, forty researchers, fifty administrative staff and ten documenters were employed by the centre; its assets included a 20 000-volume library and scores of cabinets containing documents, papers, manuscripts, rare books and audio tapes focused on Palestinian history.
- 3 Of these, 217 were in Arabic, eighty-seven were in English, twenty-one were in French and twenty-six were limited-edition books.
- 4 Anis Sayegh is a Palestinian of Syrian origin, who holds both Syrian and Lebanese nationalities. In 1972 he received an accolade from the Syrian president, Hafez Assad, after Sayegh survived an assassination attempt. Arafat's doubts grew when

- Sawtul Ahrar* newspaper published an article that claimed that that Palestinians had nominated Sayegh to replace Arafat as PLO chair.
- 5 Sayegh, A (2006). Beirut: Riyadh al-Rais Publishing House
 - 6 The young man who was executed is the brother of Ghazi Daniel, and both brothers had worked for the Research Centre.
 - 7 The reason was Arafat's protest against certain phrases cited in an article by al-Adhm in the monthly section of *Palestinian Affairs* magazine. This incident coincided with the publishing of another book by al-Adhm titled *A Critical Study in Palestinian Resistance Thought* (Beirut: Dar al-Awdah, 1975). In the book, al-Adhm offers a sharp critique of Fatah's political thought. On another note, and to rebuff the unsubstantiated rumour of quotas in PLO foundations, one-third of researchers at the centre were non-Palestinians (mainly Lebanese, Syrian and Iraqi). Further, the number of researchers ideologically linked to the PFLP and the DFLP was larger than those who belonged to Fatah.
 - 8 Sayegh wrote about this incident: 'I issued an administrative order to reassign a researcher who had failed in his mission to a new assignment that better suited his abilities, but at the same rank and salary. However, the researcher complained about the incident to Yasser Arafat, who overrode my instructions in writing in the margin of the order.' As a result, Sayegh resigned, sparking numerous interventions from people who attempted to resolve the matter. The last attempt was by Mahmoud Abu Marzouq who called Arafat from Sayegh's residence, then handed Sayegh the phone. Arafat apologised to Sayegh, saying that he had thought that the latter had fired the researcher and had withheld his salary. Without uttering a word, Sayegh hung up the phone while Arafat was still talking.
 - 9 The fourth meeting of the PNC, which convened in Cairo in July 1967, decided to establish the Planning Centre under the direct supervision of the chair of the PLO executive committee.
 - 10 The centre issued the *Strategic Affairs* bulletin. Although the bulletin was confined to translating highlights from specialised western journals, it became a reliable source of information over time.
 - 11 These included Yasser Arafat's speech at the UN, which was written by a number of intellectuals, including Shafiq al-Hout and Mahmoud Darwish. The Planning Centre (consisting of Nabil Shaath, Mounir Shafiq and Mahjoub Omar) also authored part of the text.
 - 12 The Research Centre vanished in Cyprus after the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, and its library was lost in the sands of the Algerian desert. The Planning Centre became comatose during the tenure of Solafa Hijjawi, who succeeded Mounir Shafiq. The Research Centre seems to have completely perished upon its return to Gaza.

CHAPTER 8

The PLO's handling of the refugee issue

Salman Abu-Sitta

Zionism's objectives remain unchanged: establishing a homeland for Jewish people while exiling the Palestinian people by means of expulsion, terrorism and ethnic cleansing; expropriating Palestinian land, property and natural resources; and effacing all remains of Palestinian cultural, religious and historic civilisation, thus denying Palestinians their identity. With varying degrees of success, the Palestinian people have struggled against these objectives since the 1917 Balfour Declaration, then under the British mandate of Palestine (1923–1948), and most especially during the Nakba.

Their struggle continues today, and the key witnesses to the crime of Zionism are the Palestinian refugees, who have lost their land but whose identities remain in their hearts. The refugees continue to fight their global enemy, while looking to their fellow Arabs for aid. It is not surprising, therefore, that after the last bullet of the 1948 war was fired, and the armistice agreements were signed, the refugees returned to defending their rights.

Recapping early responses to the Palestinian question

In the Gaza Strip, where the southern Palestinian villages congregated, the Fida'iyyin returned, and, despite a ban on their activities imposed by the Egyptian administration under King Farouq, they operated covertly. In 1950, a conference was held for refugees, and the Executive Committee for Refugees was born, the first popular organisation to demand the right of return for Palestinian refugees. Under its cover, the Fida'iyyin stepped up its activities, particularly after the July 1952 revolution in Egypt, when Abdul Munim Abdul Rauf of the Muslim Brotherhood, who participated in the 1948 war, was made responsible for the Palestine Borders Unit, and trained 250 volunteers. Abdul Rauf was later executed for refusing to halt Fida'iyyin activities. But

after repeated Israeli attacks, and particularly after the incident on 25 February 1955, Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt appointed the well-known colonel Mustafa Hafez to head up a Fida'iyyin battalion. Towards the end of the 1950s, Palestinian refugees began to form underground units with the objective of returning to Palestine and liberating their homeland. These efforts were crowned by the formation of the PLO; the rest is common knowledge.

In the West Bank, refugees also set up various organisations. Muhammad Nimr al-Hawari (head of the al-Najjada movement, which strove to compete with Hajj Amin al-Husayni, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem) held a conference in Ramallah on 17 March 1949 under the banner of 'The First Refugees' Congress'. Al-Hawari also dispatched a delegation comprised of major Palestinian landowners to the United Nations Conciliation Commission's conference in Lausanne, Switzerland, to demand the return of their financial assets and adequate redress for what had been lost. Then Al-Hawari was accused of collaborating with the Israelis. His offices were shut down and he fled to Israel. Meanwhile, the Al-Lod Committee for Displaced Refugees was established, along with the General Committee for Haifa and Galilee Refugees, neither of which would accept members who collaborated with the Jews. In addition, the Jerusalem Villages Refugees Committee was established for those disenfranchised by the arbitrary placement of the armistice line, and the Muthallath Villages Committee, which was made up of intensely frustrated and incensed displaced Palestinians who had quietly been made refugees when King Abdullah of Transjordan held secret negotiations outside of the Rhodes talks, during which he was harassed and outmanoeuvred by the Israelis. The agreement he signed is regarded by Palestinians as a betrayal of their cause.

Whereas the efforts of Gazan refugees resulted in the formation of the Palestinian Legislative Council by Egypt in 1962, attempts by refugees in the West Bank to form an independent organisation failed because King Abdullah bin al-Hussein of Jordan, aided by traditional leaders, held a conference to counter the declaration of the All-Palestine Government, headed by the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem. The King of Jordan then went on to organise a second conference in Jericho, a third in Nablus, and yet another in Galilee, (convened by Sheikh Muhammad al-Jaabari, who was mayor of Hebron from 1948 to 1976), to urge the Palestinian people to pledge their loyalty to the King as the 'saviour of Palestine'. It is important to remember that, during discussions about the PNC elections in Jordan, the King had promised to reject a

unilateral peace with Israel, to safeguard Palestinian rights, and that the annexation of the West Bank would not undermine the efforts of Palestinian refugees.

At first, Arab countries opposed the occupation of the West Bank, and Egypt was a stone's throw from allowing Al-Azhar to issue an edict against the step. However, the Arab League approved the occupation on the pretext that Palestine was 'Jordan's responsibility until the liberation of Palestine'. When the PLO was launched in 1964, and particularly after Fatah assumed leadership of the organisation in 1969, the PLO's primary objective was to establish an independent Palestinian organisation to defend the Palestinian refugees' right of return.

It is unfortunate that this recap is necessary, but the reality is that many are now preoccupied with issues such as how to coexist with the Zionist enemy in what remains of Palestine, how to exert control over border crossings, and other such minutiae. These matters are being used to displace the real political issues, and to displace the true Palestinian cause. Rather than focusing on the key issue, which is the reclamation of Palestinian national rights, the political scene is awash with advocates of Nimr al-Hawari's collaborationist school of thought.

As for the stance of the Arab countries, this is well known to all. From the very beginning (that is, after the Zionist massacres in the spring of 1948 and prior to the departure of the British), demonstrations swept through the Arab world, demanding that Palestine be rescued. However, while some incompetent Arab forces entered Palestine as part of a face-saving exercise, others simply gathered up the spoils of war.

Palestinian citizenship and identity

In 1954, and still in the wake of the 1948 war, the Arab League decided to prohibit dual citizenship in order to safeguard Palestinian identity. However, by 1965, the League's Casablanca Protocol ordered equal civil and economic treatment for Palestinian refugees in their respective countries of residence, and granted travel documents (in place of passports) to Palestinian refugees should they wish to travel. Then, in March 1970, the Arab League decided to legalise dual citizenship. Some countries approved this step, thereby allowing Palestinians to hold Egyptian, Lebanese, Jordanian or Iraqi citizenship while retaining their status as Palestinian citizens, while other countries, including Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, opposed this step.

The conflicting opinions on this issue can be explained primarily by the Arab countries' endeavours to protect themselves from the nationalisation of Palestinian refugees under the pretext of preserving Palestinian identity from slipping into oblivion. Today, the global community differentiates between 'nationality' and 'citizenship'. Thus, while nationality remains inherent to a person, regardless of their travels or residence, citizenship is a right that can be gained via legal residence in any country based on that country's immigration laws.

While Arab countries sidelined the liberation of Palestine, they focused on taking care of Palestinian refugees on their soil, so as to prevent the refugees from becoming a threat to their national security – not because the refugees were seeking an alternative homeland, but in case their spirit of resistance sparked similar responses from citizens of the host nations.

Given all these concerns, the Arab League decided, on 7 September 1959, that every Arab government should establish an apparatus to oversee the Palestinian cause. In 1961, the Arab League decided to hold an annual meeting for the heads of these apparatuses, known as the 'Conference of Supervisors on Refugee Issues'. This conference occurs twice a year to discuss all topics of interest to countries hosting Palestinian refugees. But other than keeping a watertight security grip on refugees, the Conference of Supervisors has taken no tangible steps towards the realisation of Palestinian national goals, and it is yet to adopt a final formula for conducting its business.

Western imperialist powers, such as Europe and the USA, they have always been completely averse to acknowledging the undisputed rights of the Palestinian people. Although most western countries voted in favour of Palestinian rights in the UN, at least up until the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, all initiatives to restore the so-called peace process in the Middle East (of which there have been at least forty since 1948) have contravened international law, and been aimed at assisting Israel to achieve Zionism's three main objectives. In other words, all of these initiatives have implied disposing of the Palestinians by endorsing a process of ethnic purification via banishment, and offering alternative nationalities alongside miniscule forms of compensation.

Arguably, the high point of western deception is the manner in which western countries champion international law while covertly working to rid the world of Palestinians. A document uncovered in 2004, at the Quakers archives in Philadelphia, revealed that the US State Department held a secret meeting in Washington DC on 15 June 1949 where it

invited 35 representatives from relief agencies, churches, petroleum corporations, and shipping companies to partake in a scheme to transport Palestinian refugees to remote Arab countries. The meeting's sponsor urged participants to provide financial and logistical support for this project while, at the same time, during the United Nations Conciliation Commission's Lausanne Conference in Switzerland, the USA was debating how to implement UN Resolution 194, which was supposedly concerned with returning Palestinian refugees to their homeland.

But western attempts to quash the refugee issue suffered a major setback in 1974, when a series of resolutions passed by the UN recognised the Palestinian right of self-determination and endorsed Palestinian refugees' indivisible right of return to the homeland from which they had been expelled in 1948.¹ The resolutions also obliged members of the General Assembly to support the Palestinian people in their struggle to liberate their homeland, even through the supply of arms.

In the late 1960s, for the first time, Palestinian refugees held sway in the PLO; their cause became the justification for the organisation's existence, and the essence of its agenda. The reasons for this included: the rise of armed resistance; the popular struggle waged by all segments of Palestinian society (including professionals, unionists, women, students, etc.); the rebuilding of Palestinian communities in exile; and the defeat of the Arab countries that participated in the 1967 war, thus forcing those countries to refocus on their own national security.

A new discourse emerges

Unfortunately, the gains made in the 1970s (such as increased international recognition of the PLO, and the fact that Palestine had opened more international embassies than Israel) soon collapsed, having yielded very limited political ground. Even now, it is difficult to definitively explain why this collapse occurred. It is evident, however, that after Israel's invasion of Lebanon, and the PLO's expulsion from that country, the leaders of the PLO began altering the course of the organisation. A new discourse came to the fore, which related to accepting the return of Palestinian territories occupied in 1967, and *separately* demanding the return of refugees to their homeland, regardless of sovereignty on the ground.

This discourse was cemented during the 1988 PNC conference in Algeria where most members (and I was not among them) accepted the notion of establishing a Palestinian state in the West Bank and the Gaza

Strip. It can be argued that this shift was already visible in the mid-1980s. On a date that I cannot pinpoint exactly, the PLO's Department of Return was renamed the Department of Refugee Affairs, as if the refugee issue was merely one of the PLO's responsibilities, and not the primary purpose behind its creation.²

The first head of the Department of Refugee Affairs was Ahmad al-Yamani (Abu Maher), and he was succeeded by Abu Ali Mustafa. However, in the wake of the 1993 Oslo Accords, which fell short of meeting the most basic criteria of international law, the Department of Refugees was increasingly marginalised. The stronger parties imposed a settlement on the weaker ones. This allowed the strong to overlook terms of the agreement that went against the desires of the weaker groups, while, at the same time, coercing the weaker parties into endorsing terms that favoured the strong. A struggle then ensued over who was to head the department, and it was decided that Asad Abdul Rahman should take on the role, but he resigned when the PLO was excluded from the 2000 Camp David talks. Mahmoud Abbas then assumed the position for a short period, followed by Zakaria al-Agha, who, at the time of writing (in 2006), still held the post.

A review of the work of the Department of Refugees, 1997 to 2006

As a result of personal co-operation from the heads of the Department of Refugees, Asad Abdul Rahman and Zakaria al-Agha, I was given an opportunity to review the work done by the department from 1997 to 2006.³ I did so by participating in conferences, making suggestions and presenting papers.

The department has offices in Gaza, Ramallah, Amman, Beirut, as well as a small office in Nablus. It employs a blend of Fatah old-timers, specialists and administrators. By 2006, the department's budget was among the smallest in the Palestinian Authority, its output was close to nil, and the morale of its staff was in tatters. Despite the presence of some loyal employees, a level of indifference that involved little more than cajoling foreign donors for funding was the norm. In fact, some members of the department had close ties with the Israelis.

The condition of the Department of Refugees is extremely saddening, and its neglect amounts to a crime against the state of Palestine. The department was once part of the PLO, and represented two-thirds of the Palestinian people – that is, almost six million individuals. If

we add persons displaced after the 1967 war, this number increases to seven million, or three-quarters of the Palestinian people, all of whom have been displaced from their homes at least once, and, in some cases, twice. How is it possible that the affairs of the majority of the Palestinian people are entrusted to a group of largely lazy and marginalised bureaucrats, whose impact is negligible? Or has this situation been deliberately engineered, so that the department is but a symbol of the cause, serving as a communication channel with relief agencies, and ready to simply rubberstamp PLO decisions on refugees when necessary?

If this situation were put right, the Department of Refugees would form a strong mechanism, employing not less than a hundred experts on law, population, geography, history, statistics, economics, media, research and international relations. It would issue factual and political papers on every topic of relevance, send representatives to all conferences, and maintain close communication with refugees inside historic Palestine as well as those in exile, via locally elected committees. The department would have a voice in framing Arab and international policy, and in all international organisations, both governmental and non-governmental. The list goes on.

The fact is that, even if the department remains as is, our enemies will not stand still. The Zionists are using the US Congress and the European Commission to sideline the role of the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), and diminish its role. This agency is the only reliable witness to the refugee issue, and it is all that remains of UN Resolution 194; it is also the only UN agency that is fully accountable to the General Assembly. Attempts to undermine UNRWA began in about 2004, under the pretext of enhancing its performance. Then a so-called 'consultative board' was introduced to determine how UNRWA's funds were to be spent by its main donors. This means that, in addition to controlling UNRWA's budget, the US and Europe now have the power to prevent the publishing of a school textbook that mentions the word 'Palestine', or to prevent the rebuilding of homes demolished by Israel in Rafah. Such examples are endless.

Where is the Department of Refugees in this? A handful of dedicated workers do their best, but the sheer magnitude of the task requires far more than they can cope with. If the department's objectives were determined based on a clear-cut national perspective, and if it had a budget equal to even a fraction of that allocated to the security apparatuses, our primary cause would be in a much better position.

The rise of refugee committees in the wake of the Oslo Accords

Given this background, it is hardly surprising that broad segments of the Palestinian people have begun defending the refugee issue and their right of return in the wake of the Oslo Accords. Since 1993, hundreds of popular committees have been set up in all the areas inhabited by refugees – from refugee camps in Rafah to universities in San Francisco – and conferences have been held in most European capitals and US cities. Subsequently, similar conventions have been reluctantly allowed in some Arab countries. Maps, books, films and websites have been made available to highlight the refugee issue and their indivisible rights. The committees have begun to participate in international human-rights conventions, and have organised their own conferences to lobby for popular and governmental support. These broad array of committees have similar objectives, and some, such as the Right of Return alliance, and the Right of Return Congress, have established an international presence.

Such popular forces have long helped to spearhead efforts to defend Palestinian rights against political bargaining. For example, relocation and displacement proposals were proposed by western powers between 1948 and 1967, and then by Israel from 1967 to 1993. Ironically, in the wake of the Oslo Accords, and for the first time in the history of the conflict, a stray group of Palestinians allied themselves with the Israelis, and began to contrive ways of diluting the refugee issue. These initiatives were often unveiled at festivals in European countries, supported by western powers, and overtly or covertly blessed by the Palestinian leadership. These collaborators are no more than pimples on the skin of the nation. They have no moral or legal mandate because they do not represent the majority of the Palestinian people, and because our rights are indivisible. However, these individuals have damaged the standing of our cause in the international arena (and I can personally bear witness to this) by giving a faulty impression vis-à-vis the demands of the Palestinian people.

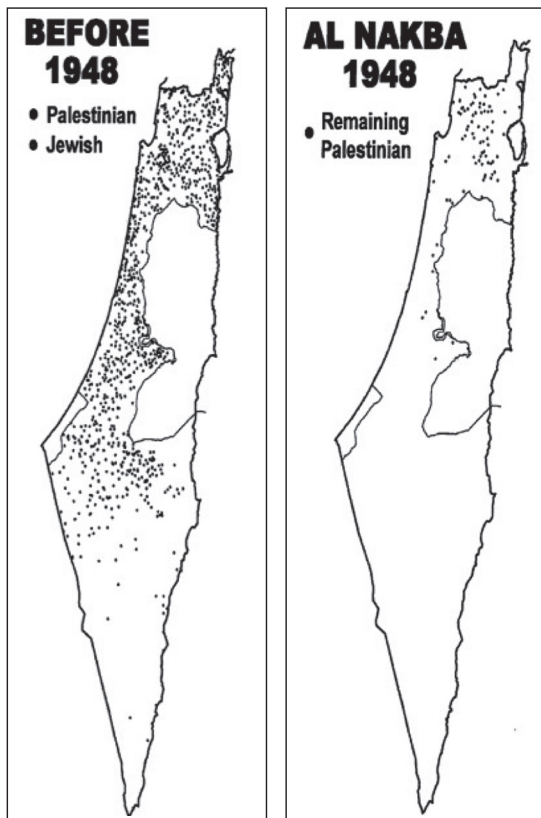
As mentioned, popular organisations have grown to fill the void created by the absence of actual (and not just official) assurances about the refugees' right of return, and to counter the feeble role played by the Department of Refugees – an unforgivable error committed by the official leadership. These organisations will continue to mobilise, enlighten and lobby the world, using their own private resources and

the efforts of their volunteers, wishing that the Department of Refugees would rejoin this national effort as the potent player it was originally intended to be.

Towards a plan for the future

To try and foresee the future, and plan appropriately for it, we must first consider who the refugees are, and where they are located. As can be seen in Figures 8.1 and 8.2, Palestinians live in 1 303 cities and towns, including 181 Zionist colonies. Of these, 774 Palestinian cities and towns fell under Israeli control in 1948. The inhabitants of 675 cities and towns were expelled, and forced to become refugees, while the residents of 99 cities and towns remained in their homes in what became Israel.

Figure 8.1: Palestinian settlements before and after 1948, showing the displacement of 675 cities and towns during the Nakba



We cannot continue to sideline three-quarters of the Palestinian people; this is an unforgivable crime. The diminishing power of the old guard – brought about by the victory of Hamas in the 2006 elections – is driving them to clamour for the reinvigoration of the PLO. This offers an invaluable opportunity for us to rectify the present, paradoxical situation.

Attempts by civil society to restructure the PLO have failed in the past, and were deliberately snubbed by the leaders of the PLO. For example, since 1998, we have sent numerous memoranda to the late Abu Ammar, Mahmoud Abbas, Salim Zanoun, Faruq al-Qaddumi, and the heads of the other main factions. The late Edward Said and Ibrahim Abu-Lughod spearheaded these efforts, along with Shafiq al-Hout who is still with us, but no one at the Palestinian Authority or the PLO took the trouble to respond to our petitions.

Indeed, some of the attempts that are being made to restructure the organisation are rooted in purely partisan objectives. Thus, before we embark on discussions around restructuring, the creation of an untainted and competent National Council is imperative. The council will need to be capped at between 250 and 300 members – one representative per 40 000 people. This will ensure that the structure is adequately equipped to represent all the Palestinian people, inside the Occupied territory and in the Diaspora, and that three-quarters of the members will represent refugees and the displaced.

Sceptics argue that holding free and fair elections in all the areas where Palestinians reside is impossible. They pose questions as to the exact whereabouts of Palestinians, be they refugees or not. As shown in Figures 8.2, 8.3 and Table 8.1, registered refugees have been exiled to 602 UNRWA-supervised camps and locations. A further 1.5 million refugees, not registered by the UN, currently live in Arab and other cities. But despite Palestinian dispersion across the globe, 88 per cent of Palestinians remain either inside historic Palestine or in the countries adjacent to the Occupied Territory.

As of 2006, there were approximately 10 million Palestinians worldwide, two-thirds of whom are classified as refugees (see Table 8.1), and three-quarters of whom are classified as either refugees or displaced individuals.



Figure 8.2 Displaced Palestinian populations in what remained of historic Palestine and in neighbouring Arab countries after 1948

Figure 8.3 Geographical distribution of Palestinians in general, and refugees in particular, 1998

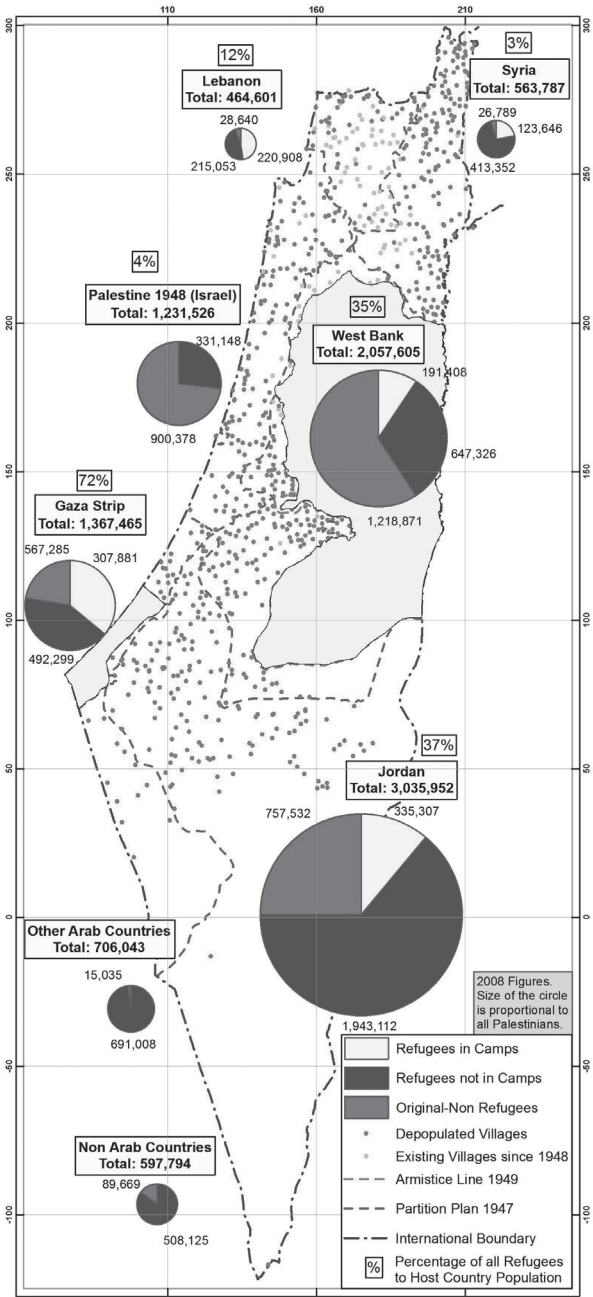


Table 8.1 The distribution and refugee status of Palestinians in 2005

Area of refuge	Total number of Palestinians	As % of total population	Palestinian refugees	As % of refugees
Palestine 1948 (Israel)	1 180 674	12.2	309 564	4.8
Gaza Strip	1 243 826	12.9	948 658	14.8
West Bank	1 976 944	20.5	808 402	12.6
<i>West Bank and Gaza Strip total</i>	<i>3 220 770</i>	<i>33.4</i>	<i>1 757 060</i>	<i>27.3</i>
<i>Palestine total</i>	<i>4 401 444</i>	<i>45.6</i>	<i>2 066 624</i>	<i>32.1</i>
Jordan	2 883 043	29.9	2 156 790	33.5
Lebanon	532 676	5.5	505 219	7.9
Syria	576 609	6.0	550 926	8.6
Egypt	60 406	0.6	50 110	0.8
<i>Border countries total</i>	<i>4 052 734</i>	<i>42.0</i>	<i>3 263 045</i>	<i>50.8</i>
Saudi Arabia	340 226	3.5	340 226	5.3
Kuwait	46 677	0.5	42 559	0.7
Other Gulf	130 733	1.4	130 733	2.0
<i>Gulf total</i>	<i>517 636</i>	<i>5.4</i>	<i>513 518</i>	<i>8.0</i>
Iraq, Libya	91 983	1.0	91 983	1.4
Other	6 865	0.1	6 865	0.1
<i>Other Arab countries total</i>	<i>4 669 218</i>	<i>48.4</i>	<i>3 875 411</i>	<i>60.3</i>
USA and Canada	252 094	2.6	214 280	3.3
Other non-Arab countries	321 016	3.3	272 863	4.2
<i>Non-Arab countries total</i>	<i>573 110</i>	<i>5.9</i>	<i>487 143</i>	<i>7.6</i>
<i>Grand total</i>	<i>9 643 772</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>6 429 178</i>	<i>100.0</i>

Note: Figures in this table are extrapolated from 1998 data, using a 3.1 per cent growth rate.

From this data, it is clear that in Europe, elections could be held for approximately 150 000 Palestinians, most of whom are refugees from Lebanon, whereas in the USA and Canada, approximately 250 000

Palestinians could cast votes. In South America, elections could be organised for the clusters of immigrants residing on that continent. Syria and Lebanon could also host elections. However, in Egypt and Arab Gulf states, elections cannot be held without the explicit permission or amicable agreement of those governments. Meanwhile, in territories governed by the Palestinian Authority, the 2006 elections resolved the issue. Taking into account that 33 per cent of all Palestinians (and a quarter of all refugees) are located within the Authority's jurisdiction, and that members of the Palestinian Legislative Council make up half of the members of the PNC, the voting power of Palestinians inside the Occupied Territory is one-and-a-half times that of their counterparts in the diaspora.

Of the 1.2 million Palestinians inside historic Palestine (1948), 285 000 are refugees who lack appropriate political representation. This situation must be remedied.

Jordan is home to the largest number of Palestinians outside Palestine (estimated at around 2.9 million according to a census conducted in 2005), the overwhelming majority of whom are refugees and displaced persons. Palestinians residing in Jordan constitute 30 per cent of all Palestinians.

The names and number of villages evacuated to other areas inside Palestine, or to countries surrounding the Occupied Territory, are registered by UNRWA at its five stations (see Table 8.2 and Figure 8.4). Hence elections could be held for former residents of these villages, and their descendants, based on original provenance, rather than their area of refuge. As noted earlier, and as shown in Figure 8.5, most Palestinian refugees went into exile in the countries that surround Palestine. In fact, most towns and villages managed to maintain their coherence, dispersing into two main areas supervised by UNRWA. This means that 94 per cent of refugees continue to live within a hundred kilometres of their homes.

Table 8.2 The geographical distribution of displaced villages in areas of refuge

		West Bank	Gaza Strip	Lebanon	Syria	Jordan	Total
Central	Jerusalem	76	1	1	0	94	172
	Hebron	38	1	0	0	46	85
	Tulkarm	62	3	4	4	74	147
	Jenin	31	1	0	2	42	76
Total		207	6	5	6	256	480
Northern	Acre	3	0	74	21	3	101
	Safad	3	0	76	79	5	163
Total		6	0	150	100	8	264
Eastern	Beisan	7	0	2	5	47	61
	Tiberias	0	0	9	35	28	72
Total		7	0	11	40	75	133
Southern	Gaza	7	55	0	2	31	95
	Beersheba	15	56	0	0	100	171
Total		22	111	0	2	131	266
Coastal	Jaffa	35	19	2	3	51	110
	Ramle	55	34	0	0	112	201
Total		90	53	2	3	163	311
Special	Haifa	52	0	17	29	80	178
	Nazareth	4	0	21	17	20	62
Total		56	0	38	46	100	240
Grand total							1694



Figure 8.4 The main directions in which Palestinians fled

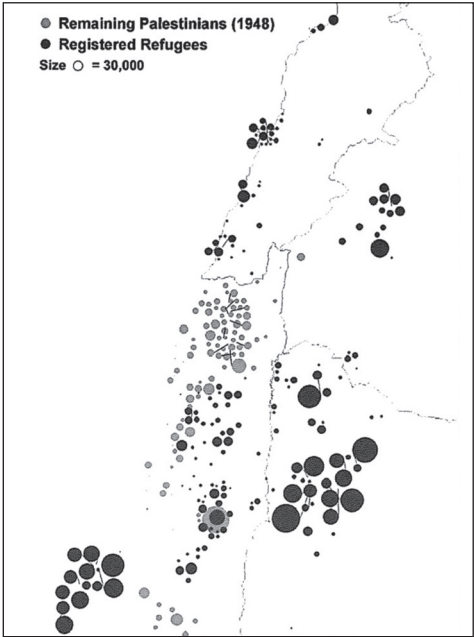


Figure 8.5 Palestinians inside Palestine and registered refugees in exile in 2002

More than a million Palestinians (including 285 000 refugees) still live in historic Palestine (1948). Another 6 million refugees live in the Occupied Territory or in the countries bordering Palestine. Their representation in the PNC, or even within the Department of Refugee Affairs, is a chronic dilemma.

However, I do not believe that sufficient efforts have been made to resolve the problem. Firstly, the assurances given by Jordan in 1950, guaranteeing Palestinian rights, could be restated and adhered to. Secondly, Arab League resolutions can be revitalised, and used as efficient diplomatic instruments. Thirdly, the international climate that champions democracy can be utilised in favour of the refugee issue. Fourthly – but still of paramount importance – is to hold quiet discussions with Jordan that focus on the complaint that the rights of Palestinians inside Palestine are not in alignment with Jordan's declared position, since citizenship is separate from identity. If British and American Jews have the right to live in Israel, and even to join the Israeli army, while retaining their original nationalities, and if Palestinians holding European and US citizenships have the right to vote and run for public office, why can't Palestinians in Jordan enjoy similar rights? Even if such efforts do not bear fruit, a host of other legal options still exist, including indirect representation.

Restoring momentum to the Palestinian cause

In my view, the primary means for restoring momentum to the cause of Palestinian refugees is to elect a PNC by means of free, fair and democratic elections. An executive committee can then be formed to give utmost priority to the refugee issue. A second means, also vital for the cause, is to revive national education, thereby resurrecting Palestinians' faith in their right of return. Approximately 86 per cent of Palestinians were born after 1948, and around 45 per cent of Palestinians are below 15 years of age. Just 6 per cent of Palestinians alive in 2006 could clearly remember how things were before the establishment of Israel. Furthermore, Palestinian schooling programmes and syllabi have yielded to international pressures, and marginalised much of Palestine's history. Thus, at least half of all Palestinians require wide-ranging education and continual reminders of their historic rights.

Thirdly, the role of civil society among refugees (both inside Palestine and abroad) has to be revitalised, and it needs to organise itself via strong popular institutions. Popular committees must be elected in all

Palestinian refugee camps and congregations, and should co-ordinate their operations – not their leadership – through a global general assembly, in which all committees, associations and societies come together by consensus, not by domination. The inaugural task of this global general assembly would be to develop a strategic plan to oversee a national policy on defending the rights of refugees. Upon endorsement from the Executive Committee and the PNC, the enforcement of the plan would be binding on all agencies falling under the jurisdiction of the PLO and the Palestinian Authority. Financial support is imperative for strengthening the role of civil society organisations vis-à-vis the cause of refugees, given that most such organisations have almost no financial resources. Support for these organisations should be lobbied for among media and professional associations, and political backing should be provided by allowing them representation in global and regional conferences.

Fourthly, reinforcing ties with both popular and official avenues. Committees overseeing the right of return have covered considerable ground in this area, and have managed to establish solid relations with foreign organisations concerned with human rights, countering racism, opposing military occupation and shoring up Palestinian rights. The role of the Department of Refugees has always been entirely absent from this arena, with the exception of individual efforts carried out by a handful of distinguished Palestinian ambassadors on their own initiative. As a result, the department's new role can be designed to facilitate all of these functions, and not to exercise control over them. The Department of Refugees can serve as the backbone for all popular conventions and associations, and come to the forefront of official relations. For this to materialise, the Department of Refugees must employ staff with strong patriotic morale, combined with good exposure to foreign culture, including fluency in languages and in-depth knowledge of international law and social norms.

How can we continue to allow three-quarters of our people to lack proper representation to defend their rights? Worse still, how can we allow these rights to be weakened by bargaining and compromises made by corrupt politicians? In light of all the resources at our disposal, how can we succumb to pressures that our forebears resisted empty-handed fifty years ago? This is entirely unacceptable. We must continue our patriotic march with utmost determination, sincerity and competence.

Right makes might.

Endnotes

- 1 Relevant here are UN General Assembly Resolutions 3331, 3314, 3236, 3240 and 3246.
- 2 Editor's note: this would have been in 1996.
- 3 I wish to extend my thanks to them for giving me this opportunity.

Part III Debate

*Moderated by Azzam Tamimi
Director of the Institute of Islamic
Political Thought, London*

Hisham Debsy, *Fatah member and media advisor for the PLO embassy in Lebanon*

Here are some quick observations. Firstly, all the chapters in this section are characterised by abstracts, theoretical and ideological arguments, prioritising distinctive perspectives with regard to the Palestinian issue. As I see it, a something drives us, then we search for ways of formulating a theoretical framework to fall back on when a review is due. We automatically attribute accomplishments to the heroism of the Palestinian people. Similarly, we link failures to misguided or corrupt political action. But I heard no mention of the accomplishments of the PLO. The Oslo Accords cannot be considered an accomplishment as they triggered the second intifada. On the one hand, we seem to despise politics, while, on the other hand, we speak of the accomplishments of the people's struggle.

Secondly, in the course of our political work, as well as at national conferences, councils and in the programmes drafted by the factions in the PNC, we continually endeavour to come up with solutions. We seem to concede to the reality of how things are, only after being defeated and subjugated. That is, we react to what has befallen us. So far, popular consciousness has never taken priority over the movement.

Thirdly, regarding the PLO: the organisation was established, based on the national and pan-Arab charters. It all began from there. The charters were a national covenant that represented a strategy and provided legitimacy. To those who criticise the PLO for lacking dedication, I ask: does an unshakeable understanding of Palestinian legitimacy exist? If we are to arrive at a new national charter, or if we choose to re-adopt the old one, the concept of Palestinian legitimacy requires deeper study. We must find a way to reconcile the two-state solution with the strategy of the full liberation of Palestinian soil. The question is how to formulate a new national charter that will bind all Palestinians together.

Ahmad Said Nufal, *professor of political science, Yarmouk University, Jordan*

How many research centres have been established since 1964? Studies that used to give an idea about the true nature of the discord within the leaderships of the PLO and the Palestinian Authority are now lacking, and this mirrors the broadening gulf between Palestinian intellectuals and their political leaders.

The refugee issue in Jordan is highly sensitive, and orchestrating elections in the Kingdom could prove difficult. Yet, when the 2005 general election was called in Iraq, Iraqis residing in Jordan were allowed to cast their ballots. Therefore, the presence of an Arab consensus would facilitate the holding of elections, and, more importantly, the right of return or the establishment of a Palestinian state.

Majed Azzam, *Palestinian researcher and activist*

We deserved a leader of a higher calibre than Arafat. So long as our leaders follow the current trajectory of thought, the logical result is an outbreak of civil war.

Mahmoud al-Hanafi, *activist and director of the Palestinian Association for Human Rights (Witness)*

The link between refugees in Lebanon and the PLO is the 1969 Cairo Agreement. Articles published after the inauguration of the PLO bureau in Beirut, indicate that the Lebanese allowed this on condition that the bureau assumed responsibility for the refugees. The PLO's office has since been banned from handling the affairs of Palestinians in Lebanon. What role can it possibly have, specifically at this time?

Ghabi Jamal, *journalist and activist*

Palestinians were just figures. Today, there are attempts to enlist the largest possible number of Palestinians on the payroll of the World Bank with the goal of intimidating them protecting their salaries and forgetting their national liberation struggle rather than engaging in resisting the occupation.

Regarding intellectual issues, the absence of fresh ideas leads to catastrophic results, such as intense polarisation between factions, an absence of strategic thought and scrambling to find compromises and settlements that we then impose on others. Each faction has its own programme, and the PLO has failed to reconcile these disparate programmes by resorting to making key decisions based on a 'quota system'.

Shafiq al-Hout, *journalist and author, founder member of the PLO who resigned from the executive after the signing of the Oslo Accords*

I was not planning to participate in this debate but have been provoked to do so by the discussion. We are speaking of tens of thousands of martyrs and forty-odd years in the trenches. This is the story of the PLO and the Palestinian organisations; it is a story of failure. We should fear the Almighty when mentioning Arafat. Once again, we are condemning Arafat and losing sight of the bigger picture. We blame the PLO, but who left the reins of the organisation in their hands? You did! Is Arafat to blame for all that has befallen us? You are the ones responsible for the creation of Arafat, and were it not for our silence and acquiescence, the outcome would have been very different.

The blood is yet to dry and the enemy continues to slaughter us, and here we are bickering with each other. You are the ones who should dictate the rules of the game. At the end of the day, we must all engage in dialogue with one another. The entire world is against us, the West is against us, the Arab states are in their worst condition in history, and where are we? Ask your children why they want to go and live abroad.

I beseech you to confront the painful reality rather than squabble and gloat. I say to Hamas: do not repeat Fatah's mistakes; disregard exclusive hegemony over power. No single faction can govern the entirety of the Palestinian people. No one can crown themselves guardians of the Palestinian people. Ultimately, you will be judged by what you contribute to the cause of the Palestinian people.

I am familiar with the tragedy between Anis Sayegh and Abu Ammar. Even Arafat himself was unable to properly address or explain this in his memoirs. However, many revolutionary leaders in world history have shown animosity towards intellectuals and artists, Arafat included. Arafat was no angel, he was awash with faults, but his critics are not necessarily any better; these matters are extremely relative.

Azzam Tamimi, *director of Institute of Islamic Political Thought, London*

We must put forward ideas for reinvigorating or restructuring the PLO. While focusing on this, however, we must not be distracted and begin wrangling over historical facts that have nothing to do with the task at hand. We must concentrate on finding a mechanism for internally restructuring the PLO, and ensuring that it becomes an organisation that truly represents all of us.

Usamah Hamdan, *head of Hamas's International Relations Department*

To begin with, my intention was to listen and benefit from these discussions, and not to add my own comments because I want to avoid repeating previous situations in which individualism and egotism have led certain institutions to their demise. In my view, the PLO is a political entity, while the homeland is a nominal entity. At one point, the PLO presented itself as a national Palestinian alliance or front, but at another point, it began representing one specific Palestinian faction. Hence, we need to redefine the PLO.

My preference is to stick to learning from our mistakes without delving into details. Refusing to concede that errors were committed amounts to intellectual intimidation, but I want to stress that assessing such errors should exclude hurling disrespectful comments at any individual. The aim of our assessment should be to secure our future interests. We have reached a turning point in our history. I believe we have an opportunity to reorganise our positions as Palestinians, and come up with a fresh approach for our nationalist project no matter how diverse it may be. We must seize this opportunity to make headway, and not waste it by infighting.

I would like to draw attention to two points. Firstly, I believe the relationship between political decision makers and research and planning centres is very vague. How much co-operation is there between the two, if any? And what obstacles hinder proper collaboration between them? Secondly, with regard to refugees, the issue must be addressed not only from the perspective of the right of return, but also the right of refugees to engage in resistance in order to fight their way back to their homeland. I am not exclusively referring to the right to bear arms in this context, but to the overarching definition of resistance.

Munir Shafiq, *co-ordinator of the Nationalist Islamic Congress, and leading ideologue for Arab nationalism, leftism and Islamism*

Throughout my interaction with the Palestinian question, and particularly when evaluating its experiences or determining future positions on an issue, I begin by analysing the balance of power. The regional and international balance of power has been tilted against the Palestinian people since the end of the First World War. Consequently, the Palestinian nationalist movement has been forced to swim upstream against a powerful current. Furthermore, after the international powers succeeded in fragmenting and subjugating the Arab world, they began to meddle, directly and indirectly, in all Arab affairs.

In my opinion, when the generation that built the PLO arrived, they did a grave injustice to the Grand Mufti, Hajj Amin al- Husayni, and to the Palestinian nationalist movement, by not taking into account the difficulties facing them, given the global balance of power and the Arab situation at the time.

Critics of the Palestinian national movement believed that they could accomplish wonders if they overthrew what they saw as the right-wing's hegemony over the Palestinian cause, by introducing new programmes and establishing new parties. However, they failed to understand the difficulties associated with that period in history. Indeed, the PLO itself experienced similar difficulties when it tried to align itself with regional and international powers that did not support the Palestinian cause.

Albeit that the Arab situation has improved slightly since the time of Hajj Amin al- Husayni, the situation still falls far short of being favourable or conducive. As a result, Palestinian politicians have been goaded into massive confrontations. In my view, a Palestinian victory, or any decisive resolution of the situation with the Arab countries and the Zionist project has had no chance of success either since the occupation began or since the birth of the PLO.

It has been possible to achieve certain milestones by means of resistance and armed struggle – we have hampered the Zionist project's freedom to operate, and prevented its full expansion. We have also prevented further deterioration of the Palestinians' situation in a number of ways. However, the PLO has never truly had the capacity to achieve victory, and to this day we have not been able to achieve full victory, meaning we have not defeated the Zionist project. In my opinion, this point is of critical importance when we assess our experiences.

Given that I was a member of the PLO, I would like to give my viewpoint within this equation – even if it goes against the opinion of every other member in the organisation. It is my belief that the PLO and Fatah should have avoided engaging in the game played by international powers, and refused to consider policies that involved compromises and settlement. The PLO would have achieved far more for the Palestinian cause had it strictly adhered to resisting the occupation. In addition, while Arab and international circumstances have permitted ongoing resistance, the PLO and Fatah would have been better off entrenching themselves and abandoning compromises and deals with parties such as Egypt, Jordan, and most of the Arab states. In my opinion, the cardinal error committed by the PLO and

Fatah has been stepping into the regional and international arenas, not as a resistance movement but as a negotiating party endeavouring to find solutions.

I now believe that Hamas may be facing the same dilemma. Is Hamas going to hang on to positions that align with resistance, and staunchly defend Palestinians' inalienable rights? Or will they begin to play the political game, hoping to achieve more than Nasser, Arafat, or any other Arab leader? It is my opinion that the Palestinian people must remain on the side of resistance. It is also my view that the first mistake committed by the PLO was to step into politics, and the second was to accept the notion of the establishment of a Palestinian state as their ultimate objective. Our real goal has always been the retrieval of our occupied lands, not the establishment of a state. It is a grave error to prioritise statehood over the retrieval of our land because, once the land is retrieved, statehood may well be within reach.

Politics is like sailing a ship through the vortex of a storm and through raging waves. One must plan a route out of this situation; things look very different when the waters are calm.

Sagr Abu Fakhr, *writer and researcher, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Beirut*

I would like to begin with a critical point mentioned by Usamah Hamdan, namely: what is the role of research and planning centres in Palestinian decision making? An independent study of this particular subject would be invaluable. From my perspective, Palestinian political decision making has mainly emanated from three sources: Yasser Arafat's mind, Fatah's central committee and the PLO's executive committee. Research centres may have had an advisory and informative role, by forwarding reports, and aiming to enlighten political leaders, but the role of such centres in decision-making processes seems to have been negligible.

As for Jaber Suleiman, who noted that I was not being objective when I said that Abu Ammar was tolerant when it came to such issues: I concur with you. If I were being truly objective, I would have described Abu Ammar as extremely tolerant, including with you, and that he was capable of appreciating contradictions and absorbing the views of intellectuals. For instance, Anis Sayegh was not fired by Arafat, he resigned. Sayegh was also never called to account when he did what no one else dared even consider: hang up the telephone on Abu Ammar.

Please bear with me for one last point. There has been chatter about 'quotas', which are pure babble and baseless misinformation. A

'quota' in Palestinian resistance boils down to democratic concord. For example, if you wanted to hold elections for membership of the General Union of Palestinian Students in 1974, some parties would not have been represented at all. Perhaps a single candidate from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine might have been elected, but I am unsure if candidates from the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine would have won enough votes. This is the outcome of electoral democracy. Whereas, in the Palestinian tradition, every single faction retains the right to have a say in debates that go on under the organisation's umbrella. We resolve our differences within this rationale. This is another version of democracy. If the electoral version of democracy had been employed, only Fatah candidates would have won elections. What I am trying to say is that a degree of exaggeration and inexperience informs our responses as Palestinians.

As for seasoned sceptics who incessantly pose the question: 'why now?' To them I say: there have been calls for reopening the PLO's bureau in Lebanon since 1982, and when the office was eventually opened you asked the same question: 'why now?' No matter whether the office had been opened a decade ago or two years from now, the same rhetoric would be used; this mirrors an intellectual incapacity.

Salman Abu-Sitta, *member of the Palestine National Council, founder and president of the Palestine Land Society, and co-ordinator of the Right of Return Congress*

Which is more important: our right to statehood or our right of return? As you all know, there is no contradiction or competition between these rights. Both must be pursued. From a legal perspective, of course, each right carries a distinctive trait: one is alienable and the other inalienable. The right of return applies universally, to any time and place; it is an inalienable right. It is a grave error for some to claim that we are at liberty to declare statehood in exchange for forfeiting our right of return. This is nonsense. In fact, the proof of the distinction between these two rights can be traced to when Israel was admitted into the UN in May 1949. At that time, Israel became the only state in UN history that was forced to recognise resolutions (ordaining the right of Palestinian statehood and the right of return) as a prerequisite to being accepted as a member. Had we been blessed with committed Arab and Palestinian politicians, they would have used this point to challenge Israel's admission to the UN.

The right of return and the right to resist are natural rights: when you are deprived of your rights, you are entitled to fight for them. Moreover, the UN issued a clear declaration in 1974 instructing all its members to side with the Palestinians in their endeavours to achieve their rights, even by arms. This means that international law is on our side if we adopt a policy of armed resistance. Furthermore, from our own vantage point, we unequivocally support all modes of resistance, including lobbying, arms, economic warfare and boycotts and by any other conceivable means. The world has become a small place and we must take our fight to every possible front.

I would like to make a brief comment on the relationship between Palestinian decision making and research centres. You all know how decisions are made in Europe and the USA: all matters are researched by a myriad of think tanks and research centres, which convene seminars and showcase different scenarios. They then analyse where each scenario could lead, etc. The outcomes of all these seminars, conferences and working papers are then forwarded, in the form of proposals, to the ruling party or opposition parties. The ruling party or the opposition debates the proposals once again, before submitting them to parliament. Parliaments then debate the proposals and sometimes endorse them as legislation that guides government policy and action. Thus the decisions that emanate from this process are not simply the brainchild of an inspired leader or a whimsical decision maker. Rather, they have undergone in-depth study and scrutiny on various levels and are the fruit of a long and efficient series of procedures.

PART IV



CHAPTER 9

The PLO's management of negotiations with Israel

Helmy Mousa

It is difficult to address the issue of Palestinian–Israeli negotiations separately from that of a political settlement, or from how this has crystallised in the Palestinian arena. It is important to remember that the inclination of the PLO (and influential powers within it) to opt for settlement was, in fact, a proclamation of defeat. The notion of settlement buried not only the doctrine of resistance, but also the notion of a common Arab destiny. Successive setbacks experienced by the Palestinian struggle have led it to drift away from its own cardinal principles. Thus, when a number of Arab countries (led by Egypt) rushed headlong to embrace a unilateral settlement, various PLO figures responded by trying to cut their own deals for fear of being left out.

In this context, it would be unfair to neglect what happened to the PLO in Lebanon, where the organisation fought for patriotic and independent national decision making after it emerged from the ‘war of extermination’ waged by Israel in 1982. At the same time, we must concede that the idea of reaching a political settlement had preoccupied a number of Fatah leaders since the late 1960s. In fact, a prominent member of Fatah’s central committee once revealed to an audience at a seminar in London that, since 1968, Fatah had made serious efforts to soften popular Palestinian resistance to the notion of reaching a settlement with Israel. He argued that Israeli–Palestinian negotiations had been a dream nurtured by both sides in the conflict. After 1967, former Israeli defence minister, Moshe Dayan, tried to open negotiating channels with Palestinian organisations, but his attempts failed. Subsequently, the PLO tried to send signals to Israel expressing its readiness for negotiation, but the Israeli government invariably refused. Consequently, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, communications between the two sides were channelled via third-party mediators or the Israeli political left.

One could argue that most of this communication was limited to political or intellectual discourse that served to pave the way for further discussion, rather than making pragmatic political progress. Thus, the status quo remained almost unchanged until 1987, when it became clear (during the Amman summit in November of that year) that the Arab League was sidelining the Palestinian issue. The first intifada began shortly thereafter (in December 1987), and continued into the early 1990s. The catastrophic impact on the Arab world of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, and the US-led war on Iraq, helped to set the stage for the first official negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. These took place at the 1991 Madrid Conference, where the Palestinians were represented in a joint delegation with Jordan, the members of which were all selected by the PLO. The Madrid conference was hosted by Spain and co-sponsored by the USA and the Soviet Union.

The PLO managed the delegation in ways that were designed to highlight to all parties that the PLO alone held the reins of power when it came to the Palestinian issue. Despite this, the pace of the negotiations upset the PLO's leadership. Thus, after the fall of Israel's right-wing Cabinet under Yitzhak Shamir, the PLO leadership opened a clandestine negotiating channel with Yitzhak Rabin's left-wing government. This secret negotiating channel, known as the 'Oslo channel', ultimately led to the announcement of the Oslo Accords at the eleventh meeting of the Madrid process held in Washington DC. The announcement was a surprise not only to Palestinian negotiators but also to the officials of the US government who were present at the Washington meeting.

The establishment of the Oslo channel was a vivid indication of the confusion gripping the PLO's leadership as it became increasingly difficult to balance their interests in the desired homeland (historical Palestine) with the homeland that was seen to be realistically obtainable. PLO leaders decided to use the leverage created by the intifada to steer their organisation out of the difficulties created by the dismal lack of Arab support for their situation. From this point on, however, the primary rules and objectives of the negotiations became clear: namely, to defend and promote the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people with the aim of returning to Palestinian soil, even if this meant engaging in experimental politics. The PLO signalled to the Israelis that they were ready to exchange their return for Israeli security guarantees, and to manage Palestinian affairs in ways that would encourage all parties to seek a political solution, albeit that the nature of this solution was never entirely clear. Palestinian negotiators

held two carrots out to the Israelis: Israel could hand over the burden of administering Palestinian affairs as an occupying power, and the Palestinians would open Arab doors that, until then, had been closed to Israel.

The leaders of the PLO considered the Oslo Accords (officially known as The Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements) as a tool for closing Palestinian ranks for a specific period prior to the proclamation of an independent Palestinian state. Israel, on the other hand, considered the Accords as a tool for opening the door to Palestinian involvement in a degree of governance (ranging from self-rule to statehood with limited sovereignty), but not necessarily to the establishment of a Palestinian state.

In any event, the Oslo Accords represent the Palestinian leadership's first qualitative shift in terms of moving beyond the idea of a political settlement, towards an actual engagement in the settlement project. The Accords resulted in the transformation of the PLO's strategies, means and objectives, and the notion of 'international legitimacy' suddenly surfaced as one of its most important negotiating instruments. However, this meant that major factors affecting the Palestinian negotiating position shifted away from Palestinian and Arab realities, and into the international arena. Given their capacity to influence Israel, and the financial support that they were willing to offer the Palestinian Authority, the USA and the EU became key players.

The manner in which Palestinian negotiations with Israel have been managed has taken various forms at different times and in different circumstances. The Madrid talks began with a delegation comprising a host of Palestinian luminaries, who enjoyed the support of the PLO, whereas the Oslo Accords were initiated by a secret PLO delegation, devoid of luminaries. Yet, in both cases, the late Palestinian president, Yasser Arafat, dominated the process.

While Arafat remained in power, he controlled the parameters of all negotiations processes, even after the Palestinian Authority was established. However, an array of new factors then came into play: most notably, the emergence of Israeli and Palestinian elements that neither Israel nor the PLO had really expected. For example, on the Palestinian side, advocates of the Oslo Accords came to the sobering realisation that the Accords may have saved the PLO leadership, but failed to rescue the Palestinian people. Palestinians languishing under the occupation still had the power to fight back, however, and have shown a readiness to make sacrifices to regain their rights. Similarly, on

the Israeli side, those pushing for the settlement lacked momentum, and internal opposition to it proved stronger than anticipated.

The bullets fired by Yigal Amir, which took the life of Israeli premier, Yitzhak Rabin, succeeded in exposing the futility of the settlement project. Rabin's protégé, and co-laureate of the Nobel peace prize, Shimon Peres, failed to implement the stipulations of the Hebron Protocol (or, the Protocol concerning the redeployment in Hebron). The task was then assigned to right-wing prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, who was forced to accept the 1998 Wye River Memorandum. But all this occurred amidst mounting scepticism from both camps towards one another. It was no coincidence that ongoing tension around the al-Aqsa Mosque presented the Israeli army with the excuse necessary for the confrontation that led to the second intifada in September 2000.

In the meantime, the dichotomy between the PLO and the Palestinian Authority was being rapidly resolved in favour of the latter. Negotiations became a cardinal task of the Palestinian Authority, which retained only a very thin and superficial link with the PLO. The Oslo Accords, and the signing of the Gaza–Jericho Agreement in 1994, were the last deals signed by the PLO. From then on, although the Cairo and Washington Protocols (signed in 1995) mention the PLO, they, in fact, concentrated power in the hands of the Palestinian Authority.

When mentioning negotiations between the Palestinian Authority and Israel, one cannot overlook the fact that, by then, the Palestinian political arena was dominated by an autocratic style of leadership that soon revealed its true colours. Communiqués issued by legitimate councils and institutions often completely contradicted decisions made by Palestinian negotiators. One clear example of this was when the PLO entered into negotiations with Israel based on UN Resolutions 242 and 338, which do not address the question of Palestinian rights. Furthermore, under UN Resolution 242, and as a prerequisite to acquiring international legitimacy, the PLO was coerced into accepting the notion of living 'side-by-side with Israel within secure and recognised borders', as well as renouncing individual and collective violence.

Talks were often conducted prior to the actual negotiations, in order to secure US approval or to gain 'international legitimacy'. This occurred as a result of Palestinian officials accepting US diktats as preconditions for dialogue with Washington. Given the range of pressures on the PLO, Palestinian negotiators were constantly scrambling to close agreements, and expressing the hope that they would achieve success before being overtaken by other negotiations processes.

One cannot skim through the history of Israeli–Palestinian negotiations without alluding to the fact that it took years before a department of negotiations was set up within the PLO. Once established, the department benefited from grants offered by numerous countries (including Britain) to help it to develop the legal expertise necessary for conducting negotiations. But a lack of basic negotiating skills and knowledge was a major weakness that affected Palestinian negotiators at discussions related to the Oslo Accords. Shimon Peres reportedly even pointed to the lack of legal expertise on the Palestinian side, and stated that Israel was almost negotiating with itself. It is also well known that Egypt played a major role in filling the legal gaps for the Palestinian delegation.

When Hamas took the helm of the Palestinian Authority, having gained the majority of seats in the Palestinian Legislative Council, Palestinian negotiators found themselves in a new and paradoxical situation. Although negotiations continued and were controlled by the PLO, the fact that Hamas led the Palestinian Authority created serious doubts about whether the PLO had any real mandate.

CHAPTER 10

The PLO's perspective on Arab–Palestinian relations

Mohammed Sayed Said

This chapter is based on the assumption that the Palestinian cause is indeed the collective cause of all Arabs, and belongs to the Arab and Muslim peoples in their entirety. However, in practical terms, the manifestation of this broad principle, including the management of Palestinian–Arab relations, has been unsuccessful and inefficient. In this chapter I first address the paradoxical nature of Arab–Palestinian relations, and highlight the importance of carefully distinguishing between the positive and negative features of these relations. I then outline a general framework for building a future relationship that is more conducive to the Palestinian national cause, and conclude that implementing this model is largely linked to the rebuilding of the PLO within a new global and Arab milieu.

The paradox of Palestinian–Arab relations

Should the Arab states be the primary site of Palestinian struggle outside the occupied lands? I pose this crude and callous question as my starting point because the state of contemporary Arab affairs is shocking, at least when compared to the international arena, and particularly to that of Europe and the USA. I also pose the question in the context of the primary paradox that anyone interested in the region must fully comprehend. This paradox is comprised of two conflicting facts: (i) Palestinian–Arab relations are not only organic in nature, but are almost congruent when it comes to issues of identity; in other words, there is a strategic bond between national security and Arab nationalism on the one hand, and the Palestinian cause on the other; and (ii) the Palestinian national struggle is ostracised and embattled in most Arab countries in ways that are far worse than in Israel, and most definitely beyond those imposed on the cause by external powers, including Europe and the USA.

Palestinian citizens are denied the liberty to express themselves freely in most, if not all, Arab countries. They are subject to strict security measures that effectively shackle their political activities, and severely distort their relationships with the Arab societies they live in. These countries place even greater restrictions on those who are actively involved in the Palestinian political struggle.

However, tight and repressive restrictions are not exclusive to Palestinian communities residing in Arab states. Such measures have also been deployed against the local inhabitants of these countries, who have been victimised by tyrannical Arab regimes for decades. This historical reality has weakened grassroots popular support for the Palestinian nationalist struggle, and limited it to the confines acceptable to the Arab regimes – confines that vary slightly, depending on the time period in question. The weakness of popular Arab support for the Palestinian cause was epitomised during the catastrophic Israeli invasion of Lebanon, when not a single demonstration in any Arab country condemned the attack aimed at uprooting the Palestinian nationalist struggle. This reality is even starker when one remembers that large-scale anti-war demonstrations took place in Israel at that time.

We must comprehend this paradox not from a metaphysical perspective, or as an expression of an intrinsic conflict with the Palestinian struggle, but as part of the historical development of ruling Arab regimes. To be more precise, we must examine the Arab regimes' position on the very concept of struggle, and particularly on grassroots, popular struggle.

On gaining independence, one Arab country quashed all forms of popular struggle, and thwarted or took control over all institutions embodying independent popular action. The same country met the Palestinian struggle with an iron fist due to its fear that rebellious Palestinian nationalism would fuel internal dissent more broadly in the Arab world. While Arab revolutionaries anticipated that the Palestinian nationalist struggle would catalyse an explosion of popular struggle on all fronts, the opposite has largely been true. Bureaucratic hegemony and despotism has spilled over from the Arab world into the Palestinian arena, and especially into the structures of the PLO. Essentially, deep distortions and soaring tensions have marred Palestinian–Arab relations, particularly in official circles.

However, Arab regimes have not always been responsible for the deterioration of relations with the Palestinian cause; the Palestinian side

must also accept a share of the blame. Perhaps the starkest example of this has been Palestinian involvement in rows and disputes between Arab states – a trend that was very evident during the Arabian Gulf crises. The Palestinian struggle, and Palestinians themselves, must accept some blame for the perception that Palestinians, as a national grouping (led by the PLO), have chosen to align themselves with one Arab party or axis against another during intra-Arab conflicts, and have even sided with certain regional powers, such as Iran. The consequences of these actions include the vindictive assaults made on the PLO and Palestinians in Kuwait during the 1990s and, since then, in Iraq.

Palestinians and the PLO have also hurled themselves into local conflicts and civil wars in a number of Arab countries, such as Lebanon, and to a lesser extent, Jordan. The Palestinian nationalist struggle has paid a high price for its involvement in these disputes – an involvement that was often imposed on Palestinians against their will. This miserable state of affairs has led to high numbers of casualties for the Palestinians, possibly even higher than the Palestinian nationalist struggle might have encountered had it engaged in a direct confrontation with Israel.

Furthermore, relations between the PLO and the Arab powers have been strained by the ways in which the PLO has managed legitimate differences in viewpoints regarding the course of the Arab–Israeli struggle, and means for its settlement. The discord with Cairo on the occasions of President Sadat's visit to Jerusalem, and the signing of the first Camp David treaty, serves to illustrate the point. Similarly, differences arose with Syria when its forces entered Lebanon in 1976, and in the wake of the Oslo Accords in 1993. Generally speaking, Arab political culture – Palestinian political culture included – has lacked the expertise to enable the positive and peaceful resolution of intellectual and political disputes, capable of safeguarding the broader strategic alliances that everyone assumes do exist.

Here too, the PLO and the Palestinian nationalist struggle has paid a hefty price. Discord, including ideological and political contradictions, has been fomented between Palestinian factions themselves, some of which have links with disparate (and, in some instances, hostile) Arab regimes. Attempts, which, in some cases, have included murder, have been made to politically and militarily obliterate the Palestinians, and, of course, Palestinians have borne the enormous costs related to being deprived of their most basic human rights.

The determination of some Arab regimes, particularly those advocating pan-Arab ideologies, to subjugate the Palestinian struggle

is perhaps the most tragic and costly aspect of the Palestinian cause. In countries such as Libya, the repercussions for Palestinians have been incalculably detrimental.

Several other cases could be mentioned, but these are sufficient for now. However, the cumulative effect of the series of crises that have afflicted Palestinian–Arab relations has led to a cordoning-off and ostracising of the Palestinian people, and the various manifestations of their political struggle. This includes ongoing restrictions on the presence and official representation of the PLO in the Arab world.

Were they confined to the Arab world, scholars and political analysts would have little choice but to bitterly condemn the isolation imposed on the Palestinian struggle. However, the Palestinian experiment has opened the door to new elements that weave into the Arab world. Directly and indirectly, Palestinian nationalist struggles in western Europe and North America have yielded far more support than they have in the Arab arena. This is true despite the systematic and atrocious war waged by the Zionist movement and pro-Israeli lobbies worldwide. By measuring political indicators, it is clear that backing for the Palestinian struggle in the West vastly outweighs the assistance derived from the Arab world thus far. Simply put, support for the Palestinian struggle bears more fruit in democratic societies than in autocratic police states. The intifada has seen Palestinians attack Zionism inside the USA via the boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) campaign. Since the early 2000s, the fairytale of Israel being an amicable and democratic state has been erased from the minds of millions of Europeans and Americans, leaving them better informed about Israel's truly racist nature. Even within the Arab region, the successes of the Palestinian struggle are clearer in countries such as Morocco and Egypt, which, it may be argued, are marching towards democracy. This applies wherever democratic progress is achieved, even if it is limited to specific sectors, such as cyberspace and audiovisual media.

But should these comparisons lead us to neglect the importance of grassroots popular Arab action or to disregard the value of Arab support for the Palestinian cause? Emphatically not. The Palestinian struggle does not have the luxury of discriminating between various fronts, and cannot possibly dispense with the backing of the Arab world, either officially or on a popular level. The Palestinian struggle must hammer out ambitious objectives, as well as efficient and constructive models to weave closer ties with the Arab peoples and their governments. I will now set out some suggestions for how this can be achieved.

Managing relations with the Arab world

So how should the PLO manage its relations with Arab world? The appropriate beginning would be for the PLO to define its mission, nature and strategy for winning the struggle against the Zionist enemy. The organisation can then move on to studying the heritage derived from its relations with the Arab world thus far, and work out how to rectify its course in light of its newly adopted strategy.

Relations with the Arab world cannot be corrected in official circles or among the wider public unless the PLO develops a clear definition of its role, composition and responsibilities vis-à-vis the Palestinian struggle. Moreover, these relations cannot be rectified unless the PLO draws the correct conclusions from a clear analysis of the Arab world.

Let's assume that the PLO chooses to redefine itself as an entity with omnipotent political guardianship over all aspects of the Palestinian cause, including the refugee issue, and as the organisational reference point for the Palestinian Authority – thus solving, to some extent, the problem of dual representation between the two bodies. Let's also assume that the PLO fails to represent the broadly popular Islamist position held by the masses (both residents and refugees), then its relationship with other Arab states will differ according to one fundamental variable, namely: the issue of armed struggle versus political negotiations.

In addition, the givens of the Arab arena must play a critical role in remedying historical relations. The PLO needs to be fully aware that democratic transition in the Arab region will be lengthy and protracted, shrouded with scepticism, and that the risk of relapses will continue to loom large. Totalitarian Arab regimes are likely to continue to dominate most Arab countries. Accordingly, the PLO needs to first decide on a methodology for interacting with the Arab world. Then, the PLO needs to steer these interactions towards what can be described as ambitious realism; that is, striving to maintain relations with Arab peoples and governments at the best possible level, while aiming to increase military and/or diplomatic support in the Arab world for the Palestinian national struggle. Ambitious realism means debunking the illusions and myths that linger in the PLO's consciousness (among its senior figures), and which have entrenched a degree of stagnation in the Palestinian political arena.

The first of these illusions proposes that the Palestinian people are responsible for, and capable of, transforming political realities in the

Arab states. This myth was born out of an important truth; namely, that mobilising Arab peoples and capacities is vital, and of utmost priority, en route to empowering the Palestinian people to achieve victory. This truth prompted leaders and figures within the Palestinian nationalist revolution to employ convoluted means, openly and clandestinely, to align themselves with or against certain Arab regimes, and to work in popular circles against the will of certain governments. In addition, internal political forces in various Arab countries were moving in the same direction, and they, in turn, laboured diligently to gain access to the PLO's energies and resources in the hope of extending their own abilities to fight their various battles. In both cases, the outcome has been disastrous.

After paying a high price, the traditionally strong factions of the PLO have learned this lesson, and it is feared that the Islamists may now repeat this error based on the same ideology of exclusion. Theoretically speaking, the Palestinian factions could hold discussions, exchange their expertise, and avoid making additional costly mistakes in future. Having said this, the experience and expertise gained thus far may not necessarily contribute to the drafting of a correct strategy for managing affairs with the Arab and Islamic worlds. While the PLO's illusions of 'liberating' Arab peoples from their governments need to be banished, along with any similarly false slogans, one should not lose hope that it is possible to increase support for the Palestinian national struggle among the Arab nations.

Quite simply, by building on a set of ambitious but realistic principles, we can develop reasonable expectations around improving the ways in which Palestinian relations with Arab peoples and governments are managed. The first of these principles is the famous fundamental rule that prioritises preventing harm over acquiring benefit. The Palestinian people have paid a very high price for chasing revolutionary illusions that have failed to fulfil any significant objective or bring about any real benefit. Above all, the Palestinian struggle must not repeat these mistakes, and must do all it can to remain outside of zones of tension that might give rise to a conspiracy against its very presence.

The second principle, and this is of equal importance to the first, is that the Palestinian struggle must be shielded from internal rifts and infighting that could result in the exclusion of a significant segment of society or official institutions. The relationship with the Arab world must be based on – and, for the foreseeable future, not exceed – the boundaries of general solidarity. The foundations of this solidarity

must be poured in tandem with the Arab League, regardless of whether such foundations can be set deeply enough or not. In other words, Palestinian political neutrality, with respect to official and unofficial Arab political structures (both within individual Arab states and vis-à-vis general Arab public policy), is imperative to precluding or revoking any harm that might befall the Palestinian people or the PLO. This political neutrality must be crystal clear and explicit, as well as open to forging bonds with all Arab peoples and societies, including all the political trends, ideologies and class loyalties that exist in the Arab world. It would be highly beneficial if such relations were built on a base of sincere egalitarianism and solidarity.

On many occasions in the past, the PLO has deliberately appointed 'agents' for itself in the areas of politics, culture and intellectualism in a number of Arab countries in exchange for financial incentives. Such relations mirrored the dismal trend of nepotism and expediency that tainted relations between the PLO leadership and ordinary Palestinian activists. Experience has shown that these so-called 'agents' benefited from the Palestinian cause far more than they contributed to it. There is a general impression that Palestinian money was squandered on a wide network of relations that can be classified much more readily as corrupt than as favouring solidarity with the struggle. These relations ran dry in the context of the intifada, and the new circumstances it brought about, and they must be irrevocably severed. Relations with the local political, cultural and intellectual realities in any Arab country must be based simply on actual support for the Palestinian cause, predicated on the moral obligation of commitment to the struggle, and not on any personal benefits or allegiances, nor on any of the illusions, myths and other dubious means peddled by various political agencies.

A third principle is to formulate a pragmatic framework for relations with the Arab world on both the official and popular levels, in the immediate and near future, 'each according to their own abilities'. Generally speaking, unbalanced development in various Arab countries occurs because, while one society develops and makes large strides in terms of revolutionary and democratic transformation, this process later declines. In the meantime, another Arab society goes through a political experience that manifests the same cycle, but in reverse. Thus, sizeable gaps appear between revolutionary and democratic development levels among various Arab states and societies at any given moment. I would therefore like to emphasise that it is important for all Arab peoples and societies to aid the Palestinian cause in proportion to their

own abilities and level of liberation. Put another way, no Arab country must be left out of the Palestinian struggle. Relations must be forged and strengthened with all political activists and peaceful resistance movements, civil and political, notwithstanding the disparities related to the nature of prevalent conditions, degrees of struggle maturity, or the presence of various powers and movements across the Arab world. It is quite likely that, in the past, this meant that the total output of Arab political backing was constant throughout the various periods, in proportion to the regional or Arab total.

Since about 2004, the Arab world has been exposed to new and unique circumstances. This began with a series of events that started to shake up decades of political stagnation, oppression and social and economic anarchy that led to deterioration on all conceivable levels. In this context, every Arab state and political party has made real changes to its agenda and re-prioritised its internal objectives. The Occupied Territory was not exempt from this process. Consequently, it became inevitable that the balance of power in official and popular Palestinian foreign policy would gradually shift in favour of the outside world, rather than the Arab world. This development has been tempered only by the groundbreaking transformations in the Palestinian political arena that saw Hamas's victory in legislative elections, followed by the formation of the Palestinian Authority. However, I anticipate that the general historic trend will hold its course, and continue to emphasise Palestinian relations with international circles, particularly Europe and North America, at the expense of the Arab world.

Having said this, the PLO must build its Arab policy on what has already been achieved in various Arab countries since the start of the second intifada, and work to further enhance such gains. In Egypt, and various other Arab countries, especially those that border Israel, organisations sprang up voluntarily and spontaneously to aid the intifada. Such organisations played an important role in fostering effective grassroots action at the level of the collective psyche and civil society, as well as, to a lesser degree, at a political level. Although these pro-struggle manifestations took a downturn in 2005 as a result of the changing political agendas of these Arab countries, they have borne more fruit than decades of official and quasi-official links with 'traditional political agencies' have done. That is, these organisations had unshackled the Palestinian cause from the narrow space it occupied in official Arab discourse, and expanded it into people's day-to-day realities, creating forums in which people could offer support to the

Palestinian cause, and connect directly with the Palestinian people's struggle in the Occupied Territory.

Apart from this, and despite significant changes in the political agendas of a number of Arab countries that has led them to focus more on internal affairs, victories achieved via internal popular struggles for democratic liberties may translate into broader, deeper and more genuine support for the Palestinian cause than would have been achieved under the hegemony of autocratic Arab regimes. In Egypt, for example, the rise of internal democratic struggles has revealed deep ties with the Palestinian cause, as seen in the slogans shouted and the banners flown at popular demonstrations led by Egyptian reformist movements, spearheaded by Kefaya (Enough).¹ Kefaya is, in turn, an extension of the Egyptian Popular Committee in Solidarity with the Intifada. It is possible that forces struggling for democracy are the same forces that have long supported nationalist and pan-Arab causes, as well as the Palestinian struggle. However, these forces, along with the younger generations, may have learnt invaluable lessons with regard to the connection between struggling for democratic liberties on the one hand, and the struggle against imperialism (particularly the US–Israeli alliance) on the other. In any case, all that is required to strengthen Egyptian popular support for the Palestinian struggle is a renewal and expansion of the spirit of dialogue among nationalist and democratic forces in both Egypt and Palestine. And, this example can be followed across the Arab world.

A fourth principle is the inevitability of taking the struggle to the United Nations, to fight for international justice, in general, and in the Palestinian cause, in particular. Contrary to the slogans promulgated by Islamist political movements, Palestinians can no longer ignore the international arena. Moreover, it is no longer possible to wage a successful struggle on any key issue, including and especially the Palestinian question, solely on an Arab level, and without building ties with broader democratic forces in the world. Adherence to this principle means that the PLO must establish its relations with the Arab world in parallel and tandem with other far-reaching global alliances. This point is the focus of the next section.

Towards a model for enhancing Palestinian–Arab relations

What I propose in this section summarises many of the ideas and principles proposed above. The model I propose is predicated on

monitoring relations within changing Arab circumstances; in other words, the PLO must try to muster as much Arab support as possible based on the situation in each particular country at any point in time. The PLO will be able to maximise the impact of these relations, or at least maintain them at the highest possible level by monitoring the combined effect of its relations with the Arab world. Such monitoring can take different forms.

Firstly, countries must be classified based on what can be referred to as the variable pace of popular and official support for the Palestinian cause. Each Arab country has its own circumstances, and perhaps its own orientation towards development, which in turn affects its position on the Palestinian cause. Thus, managing relations with particular states must be undertaken in tandem with the ebb and flow of combined Arab popular and official support. As of 2006, and in general terms, popular backing for the Palestinian struggle can be expected to decrease in countries such as Libya, Tunisia and Lebanon, while it may increase in countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and perhaps Yemen and Egypt. Attention must be focused on countries that are likely to increase their support to the Palestinian cause, especially Arabian Gulf states, the strategic weight of which is likely to grow in the immediate future.

Secondly, countries must be indexed in light of the variable pace of change and contrasting levels of power in each one. There is a big difference between the levels of support for the Palestinian struggle in official circles versus what is found in unofficial circle order or civil society organisations. While support for Palestinians seems likely to decelerate in official circles, support in popular movements may gain momentum in tandem with democratic changes taking place throughout the region. The centre of gravity of Palestinian relations with the Arab world should tilt more towards the popular level – on condition that this does not include meddling with any Arab country's domestic politics or promoting discontent towards any government. It is also important to recognise that there can be a wide gulf between expected growth in popular versus official support, depending on the specific situation within each country.

Thirdly, classifying countries with regard to areas of focus must take into account the myriad of contrasting circumstances and strengths of each of the Arab countries. For instance, almost all Arab countries are expected to reduce political support for armed resistance, while, in principle at least, financial support can be expected to increase given

the colossal liquidity surpluses accumulated with the sharp upsurge in oil prices. On the other hand, each Arab country is in a position to offer unique and specific kinds of political and diplomatic support. Damascus, for example, can help to secure Palestinian diplomatic ties with Iran, and perhaps Russia; Egypt could singlehandedly facilitate a relationship with Israel. For their part, the Maghreb bloc could provide expertise in managing relations with Europe, while the Gulf states are critical for managing relations with the USA. All of these capabilities must be capitalised upon.

A final angle on classifying countries in the Arab region involves systems of connection between Arab and international civil activism. In other words, cadres within the Palestinian struggle possess a broad range of expertise in working with civil society in both the Arab and the international spheres, and especially with organisations that focus on international humanitarian law and international human rights legislation. The PLO must capitalise on this expertise by building links between the Arab and international communities, and co-ordinating its efforts in relation to them. Many Arab organisations have solid ties with their international counterparts, and there is always much to be gained by collaborating with Arab civil society organisations to manage relations with international civil society structures.

It is possible, indeed imperative, to mobilise Arab and Muslim communities around the world in favour of the Palestinian cause. Scores of Arab and Islamic communities and organisations in western Europe and North America have expressed a keen interest to co-ordinate with Palestinian civil society organisations. This, in turn, gives the PLO leverage.

Generally speaking, the proposals put forward in this chapter highlight the '*Arabisation*' of the Palestinian struggle in the context of the '*globalisation*' of the cause, not vice versa. If the Palestinian struggle succeeds in promoting itself as a public responsibility for all peoples, this will add impetus to the cause, and simultaneously cement its status as a collective Arab responsibility. It must be acknowledged that pursuing the opposite course is no longer beneficial.

Epilogue

In this chapter, I have proposed that Palestinian efforts focus on fighting the battle in international or global circuits, by making the Palestinian issue a common responsibility for all peoples and cultures. For this

process to succeed, sizeable efforts need to be exerted in formulating appropriate strategies for solving the multitude of problems that may arise. In fact, relations with Arab regimes and societies may well be rectified when the Palestinian nationalist movement and the PLO cover more ground in terms of globalising the Palestinian cause. However, for these ideas to materialise, the complexities hampering the revival of the PLO itself must first be remedied.

Endnotes

- 1 Kefaya is a popular nickname given to the Egyptian Movement for Change.

CHAPTER 11

Towards a new kind of international diplomacy for the PLO

Abdullah al-Ashaal

As we address ourselves to the question of renewing and relaunching the PLO, it seems beneficial to offer an assessment of the development of the organisation, and the legality of its international relations in the present context of its relationship with the Palestinian Authority. I also provide a vision for foreign policy that the PLO can use to salvage the Palestinian cause from the successive setbacks and defeats it has suffered in relation to Israel's highly successful foreign policy programme.

The role of the PLO in managing the Palestinian cause

The formation of the PLO marked an important step in embodying the Palestinian national liberation movement, and providing leadership on both international and internal affairs pertaining to Palestine. There is no doubt that throughout its history, the PLO has been a target of the Zionist movement. The existence of the PLO reminds Israel of the fact that the Jewish Agency for Israel played a key role in the establishment of the state of Israel, and in so doing inaugurated the Zionist project. The declaration of the Israeli state on 15 May 1948 noted that Israel is the political embodiment of the Jewish right to self-determination. Using the same logic, the PLO must serve as the political embodiment of the Palestinian people's right to self-determination, notwithstanding the key difference between Palestinian and Jewish rights. That is, the Palestinians are vying to practise their right to self-determination, firstly against the usurping of their land, then against the occupation of their remaining territories since 1967. The Zionists, on the other hand, are exercising a presumed right to a land that does not belong to them. This destroys any legal basis for their right to self-determination on that land.

Although the struggle in Palestine is a battle between the Zionist colonial project and the Palestinian liberation project, the PLO has encountered challenges in both the Arab and international arenas, and has done what it can to overcome these difficulties. Among the most important of these challenges is the fact that the PLO has clashed with a number of Arab regimes for various reasons – initially to expand the boundaries of political action or armed struggle against Israel, and later to escape the controls imposed by various Arab regimes. However, the gravest of these challenges was Egypt's signing of the peace treaty with Israel. This occurred seven years after Ariel Sharon had dealt a decisive blow to the PLO in 1983, forcing the organisation into exile in Tunisia, thus overturning the geography of the struggle, and entirely undermining the ability of the PLO to maintain the armed struggle.

Israel accomplished the first major transition in the Zionist project through its acts of aggression in 1967, which shifted the crux of the Palestinian struggle from aiming to eradicate Israel to trying to reverse the outcome of the Six-Day War. In effect, Israel had become a legitimate legal entity, and for many Arab regimes, the goal was now not to remove this entity in order to resolve the Palestinian issue, but to address Israel's military occupation of the Sinai Peninsula, the Golan Heights, and the remaining Palestinian territories that had not been occupied in 1948.

The Arab League's summit in Rabat in 1967 emphasised that the PLO – and not Jordan or any other party – was the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. This laid the groundwork for two important developments. First, King Hussein's decision 14 years later to disengage Jordanian custodianship of the West Bank and concede that the PLO should be responsible for demanding the liberation of the Occupied Territory directly from Israel, albeit that aspects of this decision were never fully implemented. Second, the decision to disengage the West Bank from Jordan paved the way for the PLO to obtain observer status at the UN, and made it eligible to attend all UN conferences, symposiums, seminars and meetings. The PLO also attends meetings by other UN bodies including the Security Council – a privilege usually reserved for member states, not organisations. Moreover, the PLO opened offices in New York, where it enjoys a multitude of immunities and privileges, and which, in 1987, enabled the organisation to oppose the US justice secretary's attempt (based on an anti-terrorism law passed by the US congress) to brand the PLO a terrorist organisation and try to shut down its offices. The subsequent

closure of the PLO mission in New York represented a brazen violation on the part of the USA vis-à-vis its commitments under the United Nations Headquarters Agreement. The PLO capitalised on this hostile move by the US government, and was able to obtain greater traction for the Palestinian cause by forging wider diplomatic relations between the organisation and other countries.

Repercussions of the Oslo Accords

We need not recall the details of the circumstances under which the Oslo Accords were signed. It will suffice to point out that the PLO found itself ostracised after the 1991 Madrid conference, and the momentum generated by the first intifada was being dissipated by infighting over who should represent the Palestinians in delegations to the Madrid meetings. The Oslo Accords is not a topic on which any consensus exists among Palestinians. Nevertheless, the agreement relates directly to the PLO, and defines the organisation's legal standing.

Israel and the USA have often branded the PLO as a terrorist organisation and used this as a pretext to justify pitting themselves against the Palestinian cause. In fact, as a national liberation movement, the PLO has been the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people since the mid-1970s; the organisation has obtained diplomatic recognition from three-quarters of the world's nations, and opened media offices in the remaining quarter (including in the USA). Thus, at an international level, the PLO has widely overstepped its mandate as a national liberation movement. A study published in early 1988, and titled 'The International Legal Position of the PLO', concluded that the organisation represented the Palestinian government in exile for a state that was ready to be established based on the existence of the two basic fundamentals of statehood, namely: the people and the land. The land had been usurped by Israel, and the people had become targets for Israeli annihilation. When the PLO was established, Israeli occupation separated Palestine from statehood, and prior to the signing of the Oslo Accords, the PLO was separated from the people and the land by Israel's refusal to recognise the organisation.

Clearly the Oslo Accords and the so-called 'mutual recognition' agreements should be considered a single package. This should have been noted in the text of the Oslo Accords, but Israel regarded that agreement as an appetiser for the ensuing recognition. It is common knowledge that Israel invariably insists on obtaining Palestinian recognition of itself in

principle. Israel is highly sensitive to claims countering its legitimacy, and constantly strives to reinforce its position by coercing the Palestinians into conceding its legitimacy. Consequently, Israel insists that it be recognised by all parties inside Palestine, and particularly by Hamas, even though it knows that recognition can be granted only by the PLO, and not by its executive branch, the Palestinian Authority.

From an Israeli perspective, obtaining recognition from any party is important only for as long as this cements Israel's international legitimacy and, consequently, increases the pressure on the Palestinians to recognise Israel. The Jewish state is sensitive about its position as a usurper, and in such cases, true recognition can be issued only by the right-holder, no matter how weak their position. If the right-holder denies recognition to the transgressor, the dichotomy between ownership and possession continues to stand, and, ultimately, rightful ownership overrides forceful possession, particularly if the very essence and status of Israel is questionable.

The 'mutual recognition' implied in the Oslo Accords is an inaccurate term because neither side grants recognition to the other in a mutual, complete or equal way. Accordingly, the recognition that does exist can be implemented only via the Oslo Accords. Thus Israel's denial, neglect or dismissal of the Oslo agreements nullifies the limited recognition that has been granted.

Admittedly, after accepting Resolution 242 in 1988, Yasser Arafat then granted recognition to Israel 'in principle', that is, within the boundaries of UN Resolution 181, or the 4 June 1968 borders. Hamas subscribed to the same position in mid-May 2006, with reservations about some of the implications and details. But in order to define the Israel to which Arafat granted recognition, negotiations between both sides on the final-status issues listed in the Oslo Accords still need to be negotiated – these include the issues of Jerusalem, refugees, settlements, borders and land.

The subsequent quashing of the Oslo Accords deems Arafat's recognition merely an 'in-principle' one, and therefore deficient until these five key points are addressed and properly resolved. Yitzhak Rabin, for his part, recognised the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people with respect to negotiations with Israel. This allows Israel to withhold recognition of any Palestinian organisation other than the PLO. In other words, this formula does not recognise Palestinian rights 'in principle', in the way that Arafat's 'in principle' acceptance of Israel does.

In light of the above, any insistence that Hamas must recognise Israel in the same way as Arafat's did is not detrimental to the Islamist group so long as Israel accepts the establishment of a Palestinian state on the borders of 4 June 1968; that is, equivalent to twenty-two per cent of the territories that once formed historic Palestine. Hamas does not have to recognise Israel, since it is not the authority mandated to do so. Furthermore, Hamas cannot recognise Israel in return for nothing, especially given that Arafat's recognition of Israel was within the framework of the Oslo Accords. Moreover, such recognition can be achieved only in the context of a peace agreement, and the Oslo Accords cannot be considered as such; the Accords are merely a transitional agreement between an occupied people and an occupying state to negotiate the fate of the Occupied Territory.

The Oslo Accords set the first precedent for such an arrangement. Previous precedents have focused on occupying states negotiating with national liberation movements regarding independence, not forfeiting usurped land as is the case with Israel. In July 1981, Israel recognised the PLO during the ceasefire agreement mediated by US diplomat, Philip Habib. This recognition was pragmatic, and recognised the PLO exclusively as a military force. Soon after this, Ariel Sharon used this recognition as a springboard from which to launch his campaign to uproot the PLO from Beirut in June 1982. He withdrew only after ending the PLO's military presence in Lebanon, and exiling its leadership to Tunisia where it has since been confined to taking purely political action.

The Oslo Accords raised a number of important legal issues, beginning with whether the Palestinian Authority was an outcome of the Oslo agreement, in the sense that Israel's dismissal of Oslo could result in the weakening and destruction of the Authority. Israel fears the political clout developed by the Palestinian Authority since the signing of the Oslo Accords, and any international recognition that might be used as a precursor to the establishment of a Palestinian state. For this reason, right-wing Israeli politicians clamouring for seizure of all Palestinian territories considered the Accords to be a stumbling block, and counterproductive to their goals. Although Sharon did not officially quash the Accords, he made no secret of his contempt for the concept behind the agreement and its repercussions. Sharon then went on to oppose the existence of the Palestinian Authority, not because it was a consequence of the Accords, but because the Authority's expansion and determination to implement the Oslo stipulations went against his scheme to deny the Palestinian

people their right to live on their own land in a political partnership with Israel.

Although the Palestinian Authority was established as a direct outcome of Oslo, I do not consider the connection between the Accords and the Authority as one of cause and effect, or existence verses nonexistence. Instead, Oslo permitted the embodiment of a natural right, that is: the establishment of political authority in Palestine through the ballot box. The Authority owes its existence to Palestinian voters and not to the Oslo agreement, and its fate is, therefore, not dependent on the Oslo Accords, even if its original purpose was to serve as an administrative apparatus for implementing the agreement. Having said this, I must respectfully disagree with the opinions expressed by the PLO's Faruq al-Qaddumi in his letter to the Palestinian Authority's foreign minister, Mahmoud az-Zahar.

An important legal aspect pertinent to our subject is the relationship between the PLO and the Palestinian Authority, and even the fate of the PLO itself, given the growing calls for revitalising and strengthening the PLO as a solution to the current impasse in Palestine. However, I do not have high hopes of this being resolved, since the root cause of both the Palestinian problem and the present impasse is the Zionist project, which is still being so avidly pursued by Israel.

Although some PLO factions have never accepted the Oslo Accords, and consider the agreement proof that the PLO has succumbed to external pressures, or failed to notice that the agreement was an Israeli ploy to distract the PLO's leadership, this does not necessarily undermine Arafat's credibility or the mandate that he was given to speak in the name of the PLO. Furthermore, Israel recognised the PLO as the authority representing the voice of the Palestinian people. That is, Israel endorsed the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people, and as the means through which the Palestinian people fight for their rights. Consequently, the relationship between the PLO and the Palestinian Authority is concentrated in the positions of chairperson of both bodies, but such that the PLO is the source of inspiration and guidance for the Authority. Furthermore, the PLO's institutions are seen as permanent, while the mission of the Authority was seen as lasting only until 1999, which was the designated completion date for the implementation of the Oslo Accords. As things turned out, the Palestinian Authority's institutions were elected in 2006, seven years after the structure's jurisdiction should have expired.

Despite the fact that its efforts met with varying levels of success, one cannot argue that the PLO – which once led the armed struggle, propelled the Palestinian cause to the forefront of international and Arab attention, and confronted all the challenges presented by the Arab world and the international sphere – deserved to ultimately come to an end that leaves it subservient to the Palestinian Authority. On the contrary, the role of the PLO as custodian of the Authority, and as its partner in implementing the Oslo agreement, remains. However, the weakening of the role of the PLO, so that it was reduced to being a vehicle for Arafat's undisputed authority, and his appointment as head of both the PLO and the Authority, enabled Israel to encircle the Palestinian cause, and dispose of its leadership. From the start, the reins of the PLO and the Palestinian Authority should have been in separate hands. The fact that this was not the case has had important consequences.

First, the Hamas government is not mandated to recognise Israel, but the PLO has previously recognised Israel 'in principle'. Thus, the pressure on Hamas to recognise Israel is no more than a pretext for disposing of any meaningful peace process. The PLO, and not the Palestinian Authority (that is, its president, government apparatus and the Palestinian Legislative Council), is mandated to declare positions on strategic issues. The discord between Abu Mazen and the Hamas government is, in effect, a discord between Fatah and Hamas. Abu Mazen speaks as the head of Fatah, but as chair of the PLO (and not just the president of the Palestinian Authority) he should be elevated to the higher authority. That this is not the case has led to the clash between the presidential and executive powers.

Second, for as long as the dispute between Palestinians remains partisan in nature (and since both parties bear arms, the continuation of the dispute will inevitably lead to a civil war), the Palestinian leadership can be perceived to be the primary reason for the ongoing plight of the Palestinian people. Israeli intervention can be legitimised as attempting to rid the Palestinian people of leaders who seem to lack the legal and political ability to serve Palestinian interests. The primary objective of national dialogue is clear: Israel's aim is to start a civil war among Palestinians. Former Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert's visit to the USA in 2006 helped to drive the Palestinian people closer towards civil war by focusing on the role of Abu Mazen, ostracising Hamas, as well as cajoling the Palestinian people to oppose Hamas and join those willing to co-operate with Olmert's agenda.

Third, Fatah's hegemony within the PLO has fuelled doubts about the organisation, both internally, and in the eyes of Hamas. These concerns grew when Abu Mazen made his endorsement of the Hamas-formed government conditional upon Hamas's endorsement of the PLO, thereby plunging the PLO into a battle between Fatah and Hamas. This was exacerbated by the fact that Hamas was not a member of the PLO, and perceptions that attempts to revive the PLO were occurring in light of the rift between Fatah and Hamas, and not in response to the settlement deadlock and the loss of Palestinian rights. Calls for reviving the PLO were seen as an indication of an escalation of hostility against Hamas by Fatah and as an attempt by the PLO to oust Hamas from the Authority.

I believe that separating the Palestinian Authority from the PLO would best serve Palestinian interests. The PLO is the broader front, and resembles, as previously indicated, the Jewish Agency, but it has a contrasting mission: in as much as the Jewish Agency, in collaboration with Israel, strives to usurp Palestinian rights, the PLO, in collaboration with the Palestinian Authority, seeks to restore these rights. The PLO must revise the overall status of the Palestinian cause, and rebuild the PLO as the overarching custodian of the cause. The PLO must intervene when it is necessary to arbitrate jurisdiction disputes between structures within the Palestinian Authority. Similarly, the PLO has the legitimacy to resolve the crisis between Hamas and Jordan that erupted in June 2006.

Rebuilding the PLO requires administrative and organisational procedures, as well as a clear vision acceptable to all factions, along with a means of incorporating Hamas, Islamic Jihad and other groups into future Palestinian political action. Claims made by some Fatah members that Hamas must choose between armed and political struggle are nonsensical; Fatah has always engaged in both. When the PLO was recognised as the political representative of the Palestinian people, no one called on the PLO to lay down its arms. Nevertheless, the position of the PLO in the decades running up to the invasion of Beirut in 1982 was much better than that of Hamas, because the PLO enjoyed wide-ranging Arab protection, and had bases in Jordan (until conflict broke out between the PLO and the kingdom in 1970), and in Lebanon (from 1969 until the Israeli invasion of Beirut in 1982). Hamas, on the other hand, has always operated from within Palestine, and has thus been fully exposed to, and beleaguered by, Israel. Israel cuts off Hamas's supply routes and practices a policy of mass murder and extermination

on the pretext that Hamas is a 'terrorist organisation' which has no right to wage war against Israel.

Fourth, and finally, the PLO has to regain the confidence of the Palestinian people. Clarity must be created about who represents the people: the PLO or Hamas? In order to disentangle this conundrum temporarily, I would suggest that Hamas represents the people who voted for the Palestinian Legislative Council, while the PLO represents Palestinians abroad and international supporters of the Palestinian people. There would be no contradictions or confusion if all sides worked hand-in-hand in a sincere spirit and heightened awareness of the dangers facing all Palestinians.

The existing duality between the Hamas government and the PLO in the realm of foreign policy can serve as grounds for misunderstanding, as occurred between Faruq al-Qaddumi and Mahmoud az-Zahar during the Non-aligned Movement's 2006 meeting of foreign ministers in Malaysia. Such misunderstandings weaken Palestinian representation abroad, hence full co-ordination must be arranged among these key Palestinian institutions.

To conclude, the presence of Palestinian diplomatic missions in other countries is exceptional since Palestine is not a state in the legal sense of the term. Thus, mutual representation aims to promote the Palestinian people's presence on the international theatre.

Part IV Debate

Moderated by Adnan Sayyed Hussein President of the Lebanese University

Majdi Hammad, *professor of political science, and president of the Board of Trustees at the Lebanese International University.*

When exactly did the downturn in negotiations begin? In order to break the ice with the Americans, Abu Ammar offered massive concessions in return for nothing in Geneva. The objectives of negotiations are ambiguous and unknown; the same goes for their reference points and priorities. Israel's priorities were clear from the outset: usurp everything before joining the negotiating table. The quintessential issue is not the Palestinian issue, but rather Arab progress and unity vis-à-vis Zionism.

Walid Muhammad Ali, *general manager, Baheth Center for Strategic and Palestinian Studies, Beirut*

Without acquiring the means of empowerment, we cannot obtain anything. Politics nowadays is based on the Darwinian theory of 'survival of the fittest', and the backwardness and fragmentation of the Arab world is preventing us from gaining empowerment and strength.

Raafat Morra, *Hamas activist, journalist and editor-in-chief of Filisteen al-Muslima*

Our intrinsic problem in the Palestinian arena lies in how we manage change. We mismanaged the settlement process by conceding to a host of international resolutions, and failing to develop a clear strategy for how we wanted to conduct the negotiations. In addition to having a weak system of checks and balances, we made a feeble delegation responsible for engaging in the negotiations. Unfortunately, from being a means, the settlement process turned into an end; from being an instrument, it became a project in its own right. The settlement process was an instrument dictated by the ruling orthodoxy, and it has become a *fait accompli* in the Palestinian arena.

Palestinians are now calling on the Palestinian Authority to recognise Israel and lay down its arms. The ingredients needed to improve internal Palestinian relations are fraternity, unity and common interests. To rectify the errors of the past, we must embrace dialogue and persuasion. But perhaps it is too late for this? It might be more beneficial to complete the election process that birthed the new political representation before starting again. We need to use the PLO as our primary reference and starting point, and ensure that the issue of right to land, as well as the resistance and unity of the Palestinian people are non-negotiable.

Ahmad Said Nufal, *professor of political science, Yarmouk University, Jordan*

With respect to negotiations, I would like to highlight three flaws: (i) the weakness of Palestinian negotiators, who resorted to using Hebrew maps for reference claiming that they had had no time to translate them; (ii) the poor preparations that went into the negotiations process; and (iii) the absence of negotiating experience among those given responsibility for representing the Palestinians. I find the argument put forward by Mohammed Sayed Said highly relevant. Countless restrictions shackle Palestinians and prevent them from expressing their opinions in Arab countries; sometimes Arab citizens of these countries support the Palestinians, but Palestinians in Arab countries are not permitted to do this. Some Arab countries engage with the Palestinian issue, while others have used it as a stepping stone to liberate their own territory in exchange for recognising Israel. With regard to financial resources, none of the oil-rich Arab countries has supported the Palestinian people. Since its inception, the PLO has been treated as an illegitimate child, and consequently, with the exception of Egypt, the organisation has been besieged by all the Arab countries. In this context, I recall the words of the late Ahmad al-Shuqayri; who once noted that all Arab countries ramble on about supporting Palestine, but the reality is quite the opposite; they are stifling the Palestinian people.

Hisham Debsy, *Fatah member and media advisor for the PLO embassy in Lebanon*

The PLO cannot be assessed independently from all that has befallen the Palestinian people since the 1973 transition. A paradox that no one has mentioned yet is that the PLO was established with the objective of annihilating Israel, but, after 1973, the Palestinian national struggle became about establishing Palestinian statehood over the

1967 territories. There is no disagreement about this. When critiquing the PLO's progress, one must keep in mind its stance towards, and relationship with, the pan-Arab world (as embodied by various Arab regimes) and with the Islamic movement. We must not wallow in self-blame, but rather maintain an objective perspective.

Hassan Nafaa, *distinguished social science scholar and author*

Did the PLO present a model for leading the struggle that was different to those put forward by other Arab regimes? Unfortunately, it presented a Palestinian-only model, and the lesson to be learnt is the need to transform the Palestinian struggle from being Palestinian-only into a wider endeavour. We must consider the relevance of the Palestinian issue: is it an Arab issue or a Palestinian centric one? The responsibility for managing the conflict falls primarily upon the Palestinians, and Arab backing should be natural. While the PLO is striving to manage the struggle, it must seek support from the Arab and Muslim worlds, but it must also find ways of precluding Arab countries from abusing the Palestinian cause to further their own internal agendas. We must focus on the Zionist project's ties to global hegemonic powers. Arab thought is divided, but the Zionist project is strong because of the support it enjoys from dominant world powers. A line must be drawn between the Zionist project and international powers vis-à-vis managing the conflict. That is, any solution that does not force Israel to stop creating settlements cannot be defended or advocated.

Qasim Qasir, *editor-in-chief of the Shu'un Janoubiyyah magazine and journalist for the Lebanese newspapers, Assafir and al-Mustaqbal*

Is it true that changes on the international front do not favour the Palestinian cause? And why does Hamas constantly reject negotiations? In my view, this is mistaken because negotiations form part of the struggle. Hamas must capitalise on the PLO's and Fatah's experiences to balance its position on this issue. There are indications of Arab and Islamic support for the Palestinian people in the campaigns carried out by Arab countries. One of the faults of the PLO (or Fatah) is that they took sides in inter-Arab conflicts. It is vital that Hamas learns from these previous mistakes, and is not tempted to interfere in Arab conflicts.

Munir Shafiq, co-ordinator of the Nationalist Islamic Congress, and leading ideologue for Arab nationalism, leftism and Islamism

Our experiences must be re-evaluated, especially the strategy leading to the Oslo Accords, and the ensuing negotiations. Realities on the ground have changed since the beginning of those negotiations. We have arrived at concrete conclusions. The problem did not lie in the competence of Palestinian negotiators; Yasser Arafat was the best of negotiators. The problem lay with the Arab regimes, which viewed peace as the key element of those negotiations. Abu Mazen had a plan, but this was sidelined because what was required was an unconditional surrender to Israeli dictates. At this point, we are confronted with Olmert's plan (which has since become Bush's plan) and when we attempt to return to the negotiating table, the argument will be made that the road is blocked, and another strategy must be adopted. Fatah and Abu Mazen must be convinced of this. I believe that Abu Mazen will eventually submit his resignation, just as he did when he was in the prime minister's office. The problem is how to deal with the balance of power, that is, how to manage the dictates of Israel and its allies while the Arab world is so weak. How do we face this moment, and build upon Arafat's and Abu Mazen's experiences? National unity is essential as a prelude to confronting and thwarting Olmert's plan. Those engaged in negotiations must withdraw and return to the frontline, so that their strategy involves both negotiation and attack.

Abdullah al-Ashaal, *chair of the Political Science Department at Ain-Shams University, Cairo, and specialist in international affairs and international law*

First, if the Oslo Accords had been implemented, there would be a Palestinian state, and negotiations would have revolved around 'final-status' issues. The problem with Oslo is that Israel entered the process so that it would serve as a stage in its project. The Palestinians, on the other hand, entered it to save the day, or to capitalise on the gains of the first intifada. Now we have the Olmert plan before us, and we have a new Israeli project, which is bent on eating up what is left of Palestinian lands. Olmert, of course, does not want to keep all the 'honour' to himself; he also wants to be seen to give some land to the Palestinians. These are stages in the story of 'Zionist glory', whereby every Israeli leader tries to occupy a prominent position in Israeli history.

What is being asked of Hamas is also being asked of Fatah. Unfortunately, Fatah, Israel, the Arab countries, the Quartet, the UN

and the entire world are all against Hamas. For them, Hamas is the enemy. This means that the issue has become about forcing Hamas to accept the given preconditions. Let's assume that Hamas accepts these preconditions: what do we do next? Will we liberate Palestine? Will we stop Olmert? What is happening is not a political dispute; it is an attempt to stifle Hamas. This is a tragedy. Hamas adheres to an honest discourse, and anyone who speaks for the rights of the Palestinians must be disposed of. If Hamas fails in Palestine, the failure will not be because the organisation is an Islamist experiment, but because Arab regimes fear the Muslim Brotherhood. This is the reason behind Egypt's reluctance to support Hamas.

Hamas is under pressure to recognise Israel. What does this mean? Above all, it means Hamas must embrace negotiations, and work towards reaching a settlement. Egypt recognised Israel after both sides agreed to resolve all issues. They agreed that Israel would withdraw. Only after that, did Egypt recognise Israel. Recognition, therefore, comes only after peace accords and settlements.

Hamas is not asked to recognise the PLO as the overarching body authorised to communicate with Israel, as mentioned in the Oslo agreement. Hamas is the executive authority inside Palestinian territories, and it must abide by the orders and instructions of the PLO. However, it is doubtful that Hamas and the PLO will establish this sort of relationship. Abu Mazen has said that he will consult only with the PLO and not with Hamas. The PLO is now being seen as the culprit that stands in the way of all progress. Ultimately, what we want is the unity of the Palestinian people as a whole, and the PLO is still the umbrella under which most Palestinian people are united. But now everything is at risk because everyone except Hamas is using the same discourse in relation to defending Palestine. When this problem is overcome, Israel will realise that there is a potent Arab voice that it is compelled to listen to; only then will Israel agree to negotiations. The Arab world will help only once Palestinians help themselves. Palestinians must unite and speak with one voice. I am afraid that without this, our situation may take a turn for the worse. After all, support for factionalism is the quickest and most effective way of eliminating leadership.

As for rejecting violence: this is also dubbed as rejecting terrorism, so if we say that we reject violence, it means that we are convinced that what we practise can be described as terrorism. The word 'violence' is a nasty one. The Quartet used to argue that there is violence and counter violence, and that violence is Palestinian while counter violence

is Israeli. This makes Palestinian violence the starting point and denies both the occupation and the oppressive policies that have been implemented in its name. When Mubarak spoke to Bush on behalf of the Arab states during the Sharm el-Sheikh Summit, I hoped that Bush might not label the Palestinians' defence of themselves as terrorism. But it is now clear that when US presidents, Olmert, or their minions, talk about violence, they are referring to Palestinian resistance. For them, what is required from the Palestinians is to die without a fight. This is the reason behind the failure to reach a settlement, and the breakdown of the negotiations.

PART V



CHAPTER 12

Rebuilding the PLO: Fatah's perspective

Fathi Abu al-Ardat

The Nakba of 1948 took place in the gloomiest of circumstances, allowing the western Zionist imperial alliance to displace Palestinians from our land. The Nakba essentially implemented the Balfour Declaration, and allowed a Jewish homeland to be established on Palestinian lands. This was a catastrophe for our struggling people, who have since held on and fought tooth and nail to defend their land. However, the magnitude of the conspiracy against our people – the uncooperative role played by other Arab states, and the various massacres that took place in our villages and cities – culminated in the displacement of our people which I see as one of the greatest tragedies of the twentieth century. Palestinians are now scattered around the world, and are concentrated particularly in the Arab countries. In the diaspora, our people have endured attempts to deny their national identity, and to dismiss the concerns they express. Effectively, Palestinians have been subjected to decades of systematic oppression and persecution.

However, our people's genuine and deep-rooted relationship with their homeland has been crucial in helping them to withstand all obstacles and all the attempts that have been made to erase and dissolve their identity. Indeed, the challenges they have experienced have made our people face up to the suffering caused by the Nakba, and endeavour to free themselves from chains of dependence. In the face of dire and complex challenges, and an ubiquitous sense of defeat, the vanguard of our people chose the path of armed resistance against the occupier. In essence, the conflict is about the land that was occupied, and the people who were forcefully evicted and dispossessed of their homes and belongings.

The launch of armed resistance by different Palestinian factions was fuelled by the 1967 defeat of Arab armies. This defeat both generated and consolidated the need for Palestinian resistance. The PLO soon rose to prominence as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian

people, and began to restructure an independent Palestinian identity and entity in the face of the Israeli occupation.

At that point, political, organisational, and partisan attempts to assimilate the Palestinian people failed. If the Arab League and the late leader Gamal Abdul Nasser had deputised Ahmad al-Shuqayri to establish the PLO, al-Shuqayri's real success was in winning the popular and political legitimacy that allowed him to establish a resistance organisation. For the first time after the Nakba and the defeat of 1967, the establishment of the PLO created a point of reference around which our people could gather and pool their energies.

The Arab League and the UN eventually recognised this. Martyr and leader Yasser Arafat stood on the podium at the UN General Assembly, and declared the rebirth of the new Palestinian people, famously imploring the world: 'I come to you wielding an olive branch in one hand, and a freedom fighter's gun in the other. Do not let the olive branch fall.' But this occurred after Palestinians had already been depicted as a bunch of pathetic refugees, queuing for aid from international and humanitarian organisations. It took the struggles and sacrifices of thousands of martyrs and detainees, the casualties suffered by ordinary Palestinians, and the solidarity of noble individuals (in the Arab and Muslim nations and in the wider world) in defence of our just and ongoing struggle for self-determination and our right of return, for our people to reappear on the international political scene. In the end, the power of the truth in our struggle for national identity spoke on behalf of the Palestinian people, and for our right to return to our homeland.

Based on all of the above, and from the very beginning, Fatah realised the importance of Palestinian legitimacy, of Palestine regaining its status in the international community. Similarly, Fatah also recognised the importance of gaining legitimacy in the eyes of the Palestinian people themselves. Palestinians are keen for an established and stable political reference point that reflects their political, material and desired identity at home and in the diaspora.

We deem the rise of the PLO to be the most important of all our national achievements. The establishing of the PLO signified a historic breakthrough for the Palestinian struggle, and forged a unifying structure for the entire political spectrum. Fatah is therefore keen to continue to empower the PLO through encouraging the participation of all political forces, especially Hamas and Islamic Jihad, and through the re-establishment of the Palestinian National Council, as agreed

upon by the parties that convened in Cairo in 2005. The presidential programme, through which Abu Mazen was elected, specified that municipal and parliamentary elections, as well as the activation and further development of the PLO, were all urgent tasks.

Therefore, for Fatah, the reality of the political disputes and differences among the different factions within the Palestinian resistance movement are not about the representational framework, legitimacy, or external perceptions of the PLO. For us, the presence of all the Palestinian forces and factions, without exception, in a national dialogue is an effective means of shouldering our responsibilities and of collaborating to formulate national political decisions through democratic means. This can take place by acknowledging our similarities, and enhancing them in a manner that preserves our national unity under the PLO. Unity within the PLO is based on the national principles stated in the document known as the National Reconciliation Document (or the Prisoners' Document), drafted by detainees and prisoners languishing in Israeli prisons. It notes:

1. The Palestinian people in the homeland and in the Diaspora seek and struggle to liberate their land and remove the settlements and evacuate the settlers and remove the apartheid and annexation and separation wall and to achieve their right to freedom, return and independence and to exercise their right to self-determination, including the right to establish their independent state with al-Quds al-Shareef (Jerusalem) as its capital on all territories occupied in 1967, and to secure the right of return for refugees to their homes and properties from which they were evicted and to compensate them and to liberate all prisoners and detainees without any discrimination, and all of this is based on the historical right of our people on the land of our forefathers and based on the UN Charter and international law and legitimacy in a way that does not affect the rights of our people.
2. To speed up efforts to achieve that which was agreed on in Cairo in March 2005 pertaining to the development and reactivation of the PLO and the participation of all forces and factions to it according to democratic principles that reinforce the status of the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people wherever they are, in a manner that meets with the changes in the Palestinian arena, and in a manner that consolidates the authority of the PLO to assume its responsibilities in leading our people in the homeland and the Diaspora. The PLO should also be the body that mobilizes the people in defending their national, political and humanitarian rights in the various fora and circles and in the international and regional arenas. Furthermore, our national interest stipulates the formation of a new Palestinian National Council before the end of 2006

in a manner that secures the representation of all Palestinian national and Islamic forces, factions and parties and all sectors of our people through elections, where possible, according to proportional representation, and through agreement where it is not possible to hold elections according to mechanisms set up by the Higher Committee resulting from the Cairo Dialogue. The PLO, therefore, will remain a broad front and framework and a comprehensive national coalition and the higher political reference for all the Palestinians in the homeland and in the Diaspora.¹

We deem the appropriate number of members of the Palestinian National Council to be 500, split equally between those inside the homeland and those in the diaspora, that is, 250 members for each. In our view, a comprehensive national dialogue is the only acceptable discourse that should dominate the national Palestinian household. Through this dialogue, we should share our vision for a national programme to achieve what was not achieved at the 2005 Cairo conference, or during national dialogue in Palestine so far. Such a dialogue must expand to include all Palestinian factions, and must be part of our priorities, part of putting our house back in order and activating the institutions of the PLO, so that the organisation shoulders its national responsibility under the current challenges and duties.

Endnotes

- 1 The Prisoners' Document was drafted in May 2006, and amended in June 2006. This translation is taken from http://www.mideastweb.org/prisoners_letter.htm

CHAPTER 13

Rebuilding and reactivating the PLO: The Hamas perspective

Usamah Hamdan

I will begin with few specific questions: What is the PLO? Is it primarily a political entity (a symbolic homeland) for the Palestinian people? Is it a coalition of factions and forces gathered from among the Palestinian people? Or, is it simply a facade for another organisation?

If the PLO is a front for another organisation, then there is no point in any discussion about rebuilding it. Instead, that organisation should simply advance its vision for rebuilding its facade. It would be only natural for such an organisation to reject any attempts to hijack the rebuilding of its own facade. In such a situation, external parties would clash head-to-head with the organisation, and the latter would no doubt vehemently try to protect its rights.

Alternatively, if the PLO is simply a coalition, then we believe that it is the right of all factions to form any alliances that they deem appropriate. The factions also have the right to terminate such a coalition, once its role has ended. If this is the case, we are not in trouble, for there are many forms that a coalition can take.

However, if the PLO is the political home of the Palestinian people, then for many reasons it is necessary to discuss rebuilding. Chief among these reasons are corruption, a kind of *laissez faire* attitude, and the absence of an effective institutional structure. The Palestinian cause has suffered from political collapse as a result of many of the decisions made by the PLO. Another significant reason for us to discuss rebuilding is that demographic changes have occurred since Fatah took over the PLO and these are still ongoing. In fact, the list of justifications in favour of rebuilding the PLO is quite long. It is sufficient, however, that in March 2005, via the Cairo Declaration, everyone agreed on the need to rebuild the PLO.

The vision that Hamas advocates

The establishment of the PLO was one of the most significant developments in the political history of the Palestinian people since the Nakba. For the first time, one entity gathered all the Palestinians together, including those who were scattered between what is left of their homeland and those who had gone into exile and were scattered in different corners of the world. The PLO was established after the West Bank was given to Jordan, and after the collapse of the All-Palestine Government. Although the PLO was built after an official resolution made by the Arab League, this took place in the context of various disputes among the Arab states. During this phase, however, the PLO was quick to overcome obstacles placed before it. Soon Arab and international recognition of the PLO as the sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people added to its legitimacy. However, more recently, three developments have directly influenced the very existence of the PLO, its effectiveness in representing the Palestinian people, and its role within the Palestinian struggle.

The first development was the establishment of the self-governing authority in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, followed by the transfer of authority to the Palestinian Authority. The Authority's declared objective has been defined as working towards the establishment of a Palestinian state at the end of a negotiations process. Since then, the functions of the PLO have been limited to ratifying agreements reached between the Palestinian Authority and the Zionist state.

The second development was a series of attempts to dissolve the PLO, and to terminate its regional and international role in favour of the Palestinian Authority. The most conspicuous of these attempts was the transformation of the liberation army into a national security force that works under the Authority. Similarly, the political directorate of the PLO was incorporated into the Palestinian Authority's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the National Palestinian Fund became a subsidiary of the Authority, and the Palestine News and Information Agency (WAFA) affiliated itself with the Authority. Meanwhile, the role of the PLO's executive committee shrank to the extent that it is now often ignored in favour of the Authority's Cabinet.

The third development was the emergence of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, followed by the expansion of their roles, popularity, and scope. Both of these organisations are situated outside the PLO, despite the fact that they have repeatedly announced that they are prepared to join

the PLO under certain conditions. The importance of the emergence of Hamas has been amplified by the fact that the Palestinian people gave popular legitimacy to the Islamist faction by voting them into power in parliamentary elections in 2006.

Hamas's success has imposed a new reality that has hindered the rebuilding of the PLO. Fatah has tried to rekindle and revitalise the PLO and its role, in an attempt to wrestle back some of the powers conferred on the Palestinian Authority, and to transform the latter into an alternative body that can be used to thwart the new Hamas government. In the meantime, other Palestinian factions – including Hamas – continue to call for a rebuilding of the PLO, and the enforcement of the Cairo Declaration of 2005, which is based on the collective objectives of our people.

The objectives of the Cairo Declaration can be summarised as: to preserve the cohesion of the Palestinian cause, in reference to the people and to the liberation of Palestinian territories; to ensure the return of the refugees to their lands and homes; and the creation of a Palestinian state on all Palestinian soil, with Jerusalem is its capital.

These objectives are to be achieved via: (i) the formulation of a new Palestinian charter; (ii) adopting a national and organisational frame of reference for Palestinian political performance and policies – one that will establish a political programme based on preserving national rights; and (iii) creating a Palestinian leadership that represents the people and defends their interests.

The outlook for rebuilding the PLO based on the Cairo Declaration

Firstly, the political programme needs to include:

- The drafting of a national Palestinian charter based on: (i) emphasising national principles (land, national identity, the creation of a fully sovereign Palestinian state, the right of return, the right to self-determination, Jerusalem, and the right to resist occupation); (ii) underlining the Arab and Islamic dimensions of the Palestinian issue; and (iii) accommodating changes and developments that have occurred since the formulation of the National Palestinian Charter in 1968, including the creation of the Palestinian Authority.
- The setting up of a new political programme by the new executive (or any other leadership elected in the future).

- A reconsideration of the compromises that have undermined the Palestinian issue, and calling upon the Palestinian National Council to annul them.

Secondly, agreement must be reached on the following five issues.

General principles

- Free, direct-representational elections should be the only means of electing parliamentarians, leaders of the PLO's executive, and members of its legislative institutions. In situations where elections are impossible to organise, agreement must be reached between the relevant political forces.
- The quota system must be repealed, regardless of circumstances or justifications.
- A complete separation between the institutions and positions of authority in the PLO and the Palestinian Authority must be established, and distinct responsibilities and powers must be specified for each structure. The separation should be based on the understanding that PLO is the supreme point of reference for the Palestinian people, and that it alone manages the conflict with the Zionist enemy. The Palestinian Authority, on the other hand, is the body that manages the affairs of citizens in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.
- Existing laws and bylaws must be reconsidered and, where appropriate, altered to accommodate developments that have taken place since the creation of the PLO, including learning from the experiences of other nations.
- All intermediate mechanisms, particularly the Central Council, must be dissolved.
- The relationship between the Palestinian Authority and the PLO must be spelled out clearly and meticulously.

The creation of a Palestinian National Council

- The National Council should represent all Palestinians, regardless of their place of residence.
- The Council should have 300 members, allocated as follows: 132 seats for home (elected as representatives to the Palestinian Legislative Council); 150 seats abroad; eighteen seats for formal members of the executive committee and leaders of the Palestinian factions.
- Representatives of Palestinians abroad should be allocated in proportion to the number of Palestinians in these locations.

- Where it is impossible to organise elections, an agreement between the major forces must be reached regarding a mechanism for selecting members (this needs to be a standard but variable system).
- During elections, both region-based and party list systems should be used for Palestinians in exile, and both electoral district and party list systems should be used at home.
- A percentage must be allocated to 1948 Palestinians, without necessarily naming them, and without their numbers being calculated as part of the legal quorum.
- Jerusalem should be declared as the permanent headquarters for the National Council, and it can convene temporarily in Gaza or elsewhere (based on available options). The National Council should hold two sessions per year.

The PLO executive committee

- The executive committee should be comprised of eighteen members.
- Members of the executive committee are to be elected through free, direct elections by members of the National Council.
- Members of the National Council should elect the head of the executive committee.
- The elected head of the Palestinian Authority should automatically become a member of the executive committee, as should the speaker of the Palestinian Legislative Council.
- The powers of each member of the executive committee are to be meticulously specified.
- Members of the executive committee are to be entirely dedicated to their functions, and may not hold any other public or private office.

The Palestinian National Fund

- The funds of the PLO must be separated from those of the Palestinian Authority.
- The board of directors of the Fund must be reformed and endorsed by the executive committee.
- The systems and governing laws of the Fund must be enforced, allowing contribution from the Palestinian grassroots.
- The Fund's budget must be specified and approved by the Palestinian National Council.

Reactivating the PLO, and its directorates and institutions

- This includes restoring the PLO's role – officially and legally – in monitoring the Palestinian Authority, as well as in broader political and negotiations processes.
- Reaffirming that the PLO's function is to defend the rights of the Palestinian people to their homeland, including their right of return, and establishing all mechanisms necessary to carry out this role at all levels.
- Reactivating and reviving the unions and professional associations inside and outside Palestine.
- Reactivating embassies and consulates abroad to protect local Palestinian communities, to attend to Palestinian affairs, and to defend our national rights.
- Reviving the PLO's work in politics, education, the media, and with the unions, as well as adding new directorates or institutions that empower the PLO and enable it to carry out its responsibilities.

Part V Debate

*Moderated by Hassan Nafaa
Head of the political science faculty,
Cairo University*

Jawad al-Hamad, *director of the Middle East Studies Center in Jordan and expert in Palestinian studies*

Does Fatah believe that the PLO has a role to play until the liberation and the return of Palestinians to their homeland is accomplished? What is Fatah's perspective based on what Hamas has offered? Can an agreement on a political programme between Fatah and Hamas be achieved, or will both sides leave this to the new Council? Do Fatah and Hamas believe that other Arab regimes have no principled objections to the rebuilding of the PLO? If the PLO represents the people, how then can its president, headquarters, and meetings be under occupation? Is there an Arab state that is willing to host the PLO's headquarters if its establishment inside Palestine is deemed unfeasible?

Nafez Abu Hasna, *journalist and author*

We are condemned to find unity and engage in dialogue. What attracted my attention is that disagreement regarding terminology is at the crux of the problem. I do not understand what again prevents the rebuilding of the PLO. Also, where does the problem lie with respect to creating a new Palestinian National Council with no preconditions? I do not have problems with the proposals provided by Usamah Hamdan. I call for a Palestinian National Council that discusses programmes and directions. We are in dire need of this.

Salman Abu Sitta, *member of the Palestine National Council, founder and president of the Palestine Land Society, and general co-ordinator of the Right of Return Congress*

I call for elections anywhere that Palestinians exist. In the case of the surrounding nations, elections should be based on the original state of residence. I do not believe this will be a problem.

Raafat Morra, *Hamas activist, and editor-in-chief of Filisteen al-Muslima*

We should neither doubt nor feel provoked or biased when we discuss the necessity for rebuilding the PLO. The reason for this is that we are all aware of the importance of this organisation. It is what we need most if we are to move forward and rid ourselves of our burdens. Fathi Abu al-Ardat focused on reactivation, while Usamah Hamdan advocated rebuilding. There is a difference between the two. What we want to achieve is reform. This is dependent on genuine will and good intention. If Fatah upholds its former structure, the PLO will remain closed to reform. We also cannot fix the institution through assassinations or tanks. The ball is in Fatah's court. If Fatah relinquishes the notion of reactivation and subscribes to rebuilding instead, we will all be confronted by a new reality. If the situation remains static, we will merely be substituting leadership for a new physical base, and the current state of affairs will continue.

Waleed Muhammad Ali, *general manager of the Baheth Center for Strategic and Palestinian Studies in Beirut*

The PLO must become the Palestinians' representative in the Arab League, as is the case with all other member states. The PLO was originally created to complete the path of liberation. If we agree on this point, we can move on to discussing our immediate political objectives. The basis of disagreement remains how to reshape the organisation a third time. When al-Shuqayri was sidelined, a belief formed that Arab armies were not a suitable instrument for our liberation – and the PLO saw liberation as its ultimate objective. Then, we entered the stage of the Camp David Agreement. Arafat was convinced that reaching a 'settlement' was going to be elusive, and so the al-Aqsa intifada took place. Now, do we want the PLO to remain the way it is? Or should we create a new form for our political project, and a new vision that enhances our options for resistance? This is surely the means though which the weak stand up against the strong. The occupation was forced out of Gaza by means of resistance. It is well established that the enemy does not respond except to blood. If we can agree on all these issues, the matter becomes quite simple. We need to agree on what it is that we want from resistance.

Muhammad Rahmoun, *Palestinian activist*

Throughout Palestinian history, not a single drop of blood was shed among Palestinians themselves. Today, there are causalities and injuries on both sides. Has an agreement been reached between Palestinians to overcome this impasse? We cannot discuss other matters until this is resolved. There is a wide barrier between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas. All international conspiracies focused on Hamas after it was democratically elected, since it does not comply with western dictates. Does Hamas today agree to what the Palestinian Authority accepts? I doubt it. Does the Palestinian Authority accept the prevalent status quo? I doubt that too. I hope a solution to this problem is found.

Shafiq al-Hout, *journalist and author, founder member of the PLO who resigned from the executive after the signing of the Oslo Accords*

If we left things to Usamah Hamdan and Fathi Abu al-Ardat, matters would have been resolved after a fifteen-minute chat, and we would have emerged with an agreement. There is no real disagreement between us regarding the core issues or the objectives. We all want a complete Palestine. The PLO needs both organisations and both organisations need the PLO. Without the PLO, no one has the legitimacy to make decisions related to the fate of the Palestinian people. The party that can decide the fate of the Palestinians is the PLO. So far, I have not detected sufficient seriousness about the need to restructure the PLO.

Fathi Abu al-Ardat, *Fatah's secretary in Lebanon, and member of its Revolutionary Council*

First, I would like to respond to what Usamah Hamdan talked about, of creating a mechanism for discussing the political and organisational dimensions of reorganisation. Our proposal on the issue of the list is based on our perspective, and on what was agreed upon in the 2005 Cairo Declaration. This was the result of harmonious accord. Accord serves our national interests. The same applies to the Palestinian Prisoners' Document, which came about as a result of agreement between reputable figures from different political tendencies and major factions as they languished in detention camps and prisons. That document is, therefore, a consensual working programme that has been accepted by detainees and refugees, and it has a sound foundation.

Second, I would like to touch on operational mechanisms. These can be agreed upon via continuous and uninterrupted dialogue. Such

mechanisms must be specified through the internal laws and bylaws that exist in the PLO. We do not want a new organisation, what we are proposing is a process of modification and development. However, the PLO today suffers from ageing and weakness, and from being forced into *absentia* as a result of political propositions that deemed the organisation to be a noble means for reaching the noble objective that is Palestine. Let's confess that the organisation has had its hands tied behind its back due to this reality. Since no state was established, we have come to argue that we want to go back to reviving the PLO. We used to say that the PLO would lead us to the creation of the Palestinian state, to recognising the rights of the refugees, to embodying our principles, etc. We all agree that the circumstances we face are dire, and similar to those of the 1948 Nakba. The Palestinian people are besieged and starving while attempts are made to subjugate them and force them into accepting an unjust compromise – not the Oslo Accords, not the creation of the state, but Olmert's plan.

How can we restructure 'our Palestinian household' and thus revive the PLO's institutions? This is the dialogue that has to take place if we are to reach a suitable formula. Let's start with the Palestinian National Council, since it constitutes the representational and legislative body of the Palestinian people. The PLO's executive committee, national figures, general secretaries, and the heads of the Palestinian National Council and the Palestinian Legislative Council, as well as other national personalities, all comprise this council. They can create an emergency committee to manage this stage. Therefore, this must take place from within the institution. We have to adhere to legitimate PLO processes, and all subsequent organisational and planning procedures must be carried out through elections.

The democratic electoral process that took place in Palestine was favoured by the Palestinian people and sponsored by Fatah. As a result, a peaceful transfer of power and pluralism are both an integral part of the traditions of the Palestinian people. To be clear, we want to activate the PLO. We want to bring it back into order. We do not want to build a new PLO, and then have to work to achieve international and Arab recognition all over again.

We have to clearly confess that, in the past, Fatah and PLO were interwoven in such a way that we could not differentiate between Fatah, the Palestinian Authority, and the PLO. But now we have to admit that President Arafat, the great martyr, is no longer a unifying symbol. Abu Mazen is urging that we install alternative institutions. We were

in agreement with this, based on the understanding that we need to distinguish between Fatah, the PLO, and the Palestinian Authority. The Palestinian people are looking to their leaders to see whether they can overcome the current impasse. The leadership is looking to Fatah and Hamas. But, with all due respect to all the other Palestinian factions in the PLO, the people are looking to Hamas, which is now in power, and which has to form a government.

Hamas's discourse and vision is different to that of the PLO. This means that dialogue, dialogue, and more dialogue will be necessary until we reach a programme based on common ground. Both have their own programmes, which should not be imposed upon each other since, in the end, Palestine is our objective. All our efforts must work towards developing national unity. What our enemies desire is the weakening and subjugation of the Palestinian people through weakening the PLO. It is true that the PLO has made lots of mistakes, but if we highlight the mistakes and hide the achievements we will force ourselves into a plan that starts with the neo-conservatives and ends with Olmert. Olmert's objective is to represent the Palestinian people, and to strike down both the PLO and our national unity. His objective is to drag the Palestinians deeper into factionalism, God forbid. We need to fortify our unity, and revive the PLO and its institutions.

Usamah Hamdan, *head of Hamas's International Relations Department*

First, I would like to say that we are engaged in a process of reviewing a human experience that includes both good and bad, positive and negative. In such a review, we should not engage in 'intellectual terrorism' by reviewing only mistakes and negative aspects, and so tear down a perfectly habitable house for no reason. The 2005 Cairo Declaration stated that this 'house' is no longer suited to performing the national tasks necessary to serving the interests of Palestinian people. This is especially true if we wish to review our experience for the sake of improving and rebuilding our reality, while also preserving our gains and establishing strong institutions.

At the same time, while reviewing our experience, we must open our hearts and minds to accommodating different views, and to understanding the need for us to put our affairs in order. We should not conceive of our organisational structures as being closed to transformation or modification, along the lines of the proverb 'my way or the highway'. Such a conception does not provide a sound rationale that we can use to lead a people who have fought so long for liberation

from an occupier. Nor is it a concept that can unite us as a nation. Therefore, we have to step out of this conception into a different one – one that compels us to review our previous experience bravely, and to try to develop further.

With regard to the points raised by Jawad al-Hamad, I will comment on the main issue. In the past, there were three aspects to the PLO's legitimacy, namely: Palestinian, Arab, and international. Palestinian legitimacy was acquired through the admission of resistance organisations into the PLO, and their continuation under its umbrella. Now we say that Palestinian legitimacy comes via popular choice. It seems to me that some people fear elections and are reluctant to refer to them. For our part, we want and strive for elections, and uphold the choices made via the ballot box. However, I believe that engaging in elections is a real challenge with regard to representing the Palestinian people. We say that that Palestinian people must choose their representatives in the Palestinian Legislative Council, and that their representatives are the ones to choose and hold their leaders accountable, through accepting or rejecting their political choices. By this we manifest our respect for the Palestinian people and give them their due. This does not mean that we must attempt to claw our way through rock. It is also true that Arab and international interests benefit significantly from Palestinian factionalism and division. Division cannot be overcome unless we resort to the Palestinian people, and ask them to choose their representatives. Only then can the influence of Arab and international circles that benefit from Palestinian division be removed. Can we move beyond the issue of where legitimacy originates? I believe that the Palestinian people are the root of any form of legitimacy.

Regarding the PLO, I believe that by deeming it a figurative homeland, a united front, and a front for Palestinian organisations all at once, we are doomed to failure. The PLO must not be considered a symbolic homeland for the Palestinian people. As for the executive committee, let us consider it as a government of national unity, or a front. However, let's preserve the right of every Palestinian to accept or refuse their leadership. Let's preserve the right of the Palestinian people to say to their representatives after one term in office: 'You were ineffective in handling the issues and rights of the Palestinian people'. We have representatives in the Palestinian National Council that have been in office for forty years, and yet we do not even know their names.

I believe we need a more detailed discussion. We want the framework of the PLO to be a figurative one. As for its government or

executive committee, it can be based on a coalition of different fronts, but, ultimately, the institution has to be bigger than this. Our goal must be to make the PLO a real institution that every Palestinian feels they can belong to, even if they sometimes disagree with the political positions taken by the organisations, leaders.

We will unequivocally accept the choices of the Palestinian people if free and fair elections take place. I mentioned earlier, and I want to reiterate this clearly: we previously proposed this to Arafat, may his soul rest in peace. His answer was, who will carry out the elections in Jordan, Egypt, Syria and Lebanon? I believe that given the experience of reform and democracy in the region, and after what has happened in Iraq and other places, his question has an answer. I believe that even though it might be difficult, holding elections is possible, even in Jordan, through the application of diligent effort and pressure. Let's work towards holding elections. Let's try and then say we failed. But, to deem this impossible without trying is unacceptable.

The PLO achieved international status after it endorsed the Ten-Point Programme, not before. I will not tackle the Ten-Point Programme right now, although we have a clear position on it. However, I will say that no one has the right to tell us that we must accept what the international community imposes on us if this is based upon an Israeli perspective. It is the duty of the Palestinian leadership to strive for Palestinian rights. It is the duty of the Palestinian leadership to do its utmost, and to expend all its resources to achieve these rights. The leadership has to turn to the people, rather than seeking support from unreliable sources. Arafat was granted a Nobel Peace Prize based on international legitimacy, but when the Israelis besieged him, the international community did not come to his aid. When Israel assassinated him, the urgent task was to bury the man. Thus, international legitimacy is unreliable.

Lastly, we are not interested in repeating the experience of Fatah. We hope that our performance will prove better than Fatah's, just as we hope that, in the future, Fatah's performance will improve on ours. I hope that competition between all factions will boil down to who can best serve the Palestinian people, and who can learn the most from their mistakes. Fatah should be pleased that we are trying to learn from their mistakes, since they were trying their best. I personally would be pleased if the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine benefited from my mistakes, since they have been based on earnest attempts and not on bad intentions. It has never been part of our discourse or tradition to

accuse anyone of treason or to excommunicate them. We have always said that our endeavours may prove successful or unsuccessful. It is a fact that a wide gulf separates us, but I believe we can bridge this gap if we resort to the people.

PART VI



CHAPTER 14

The PLO: Present reality and future prospects: The perspective of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine

Marwan Abdul Al

First, I would like to thank al-Zaytouna Center for Studies and Consultations for giving us this opportunity to provide our perspective on the PLO. In this chapter, I celebrate the establishment of the PLO by presenting an evaluation of the organisation, as well as its prospects for resolving issues and enhancing its structures and future role.

Evaluating the PLO is a highly sensitive topic, and addressing it requires a high degree of seriousness, scientific methods, and a strong sense of responsibility. The entire life of the organisation has been saturated with arguments and debates. This is not surprising because the Palestinian cause is linked to the unfolding of historical conflict. The PLO is affected by the objective conditions of that conflict, and the different historical stages that the conflict passes through.

Consequently, I begin with the present reality, rather than with the situation we aspire to. Following the principle of political reasoning, it is important that we raise issues we wish to discuss without losing sight of reality on the ground. This helps to ensure that we avert the mishaps that may arise if we rush headlong into what we desire, but neglect the reality of our present circumstances. This principle should prevent us from falling into further confusion, and from prioritising the principle of intellectual politics, which we can sum up as ‘the balance of power first, and the interests of the Palestinian people second’. Hence, we must first ask ourselves: how we understand the PLO?

So, how do we understand the PLO?

The strong presence of Palestinian nationalism as an objective challenge in collective Palestinian consciousness has been imposed by the eradivative

nature of our enemy, which finds this Palestinian national identity and character a threat to its own existence and legitimacy. Palestine has never enjoyed the sovereignty of a state. Our war of independence ended in 1948 with the Nakba and all its destruction and displacement. The occupation was completed in 1967, after which a formula for the eradication, dissolving, or annexation of Palestinian national identity was imposed. This is why upholding Palestinian national identity has always been morally and politically crucial in Palestinian political thought.

This is why there is near unanimity that the establishment of the PLO was the most important achievement in the contemporary Palestinian revolution. This is the case, even though the PLO was established before the intifada emerged as a political reaction to the many attempts aimed at destroying the unity of the Palestinian people and their national rights. Despite all the mistakes that have been made within the PLO, we believe that the organisation – with its Charter, and its programme for national unity – provides the only framework for ensuring the unity of the Palestinian nation. Through the struggles of the Palestinian people and its organised forces, the PLO has been able to impose itself as the political, legal, and organisational representative of the unity, entity, and identity of all Palestinians. As a result, the PLO garnered legitimacy in both the Arab and the international arenas.

The perspective of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine towards the PLO focuses on four elements: (i) the top leadership; (ii) the institutions; (iii) the Charter and political programme of action; and (iv) the issue of identity and of being the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.

As such, the PLO is the material and symbolic expression of the supreme national interests of our Palestinian people, and not merely a framework for uniting political forces. Therefore, the decline in the level of unity under the PLO – which is an expression of the disunity among the Palestinian people – began with the introduction of a very narrow organisational, and group-based, phase. This manifested in the domination of the PLO by the biggest faction, Fatah, which saw itself as the ‘elder brother’, and as entitled to an exclusive right to control the PLO’s leadership structures, institutions and decisions. Reality has proven otherwise for three main reasons.

Firstly, the dominant political faction – due to its own shortsightedness – transformed the PLO into a structure that merely legitimises its own choices and programmes. Thereafter, Fatah went on to accept Israeli demands, which aim to empty the PLO of its essence, destroy its

institutions and nullify its role. Thus, unity came to mean assimilation not diversity, and majority vote replaced consensus. To be more precise, during a phase that should have been about national liberation, our national front was pushed into accepting a state of co-existence and unilateralism.

Secondly, whether conscious or unconscious of the rules of the game, the main manifestation of the PLO's opposition – with some exceptions – has been conformity. The enemy has dealt with the PLO as a structure that organises the affairs of the factions and their relations. As such, in the absence of a unifying discourse, the struggle for quotas and clienteles bred a double-edged contradiction. On the one hand, there are elements in the PLO that are pushing for survival and continuity, but on the other hand, there are elements advocating denunciation and division. This contradiction has been evident whenever the PLO has tried to tackle issues relating to internal reform: when the first option fails, we normally move on to the second.

Thirdly, the Palestinian left has presented an image of trouble and confusion. The left seldom does more than make demands and lobby for actions – often ones that fit under the title of 'rebuilding the PLO'. In the midst of this, the dominant faction has been able to impose its will. It has been able to ignore the need for democracy, and democratic mandates, which could help to guarantee particular political positions. Thus the PLO got lost, both politically and organisationally.

How do we understand rebuilding?

Building and rebuilding, reform, modification, development, reformulation, and restructuring are terms that reflect the fact that a certain assumption underlies this discussion. That is, a prerequisite for reforming a system is having a system. Reactivating or rebuilding an institution requires having an institution to begin with. Hence, the question that triggers fear in many is: do we want a new organisation, with a new form, spirit, and structure? Or do we need to conserve the existing organisation? In other words, will the new organisation be based on the foundations of an old organisation, or will it be a new alternative? Is the path being sought a democratic one, based on a relatively popular base? Or will it recreate the old one, with deals sealed 'up there in the higher echelons' and cosmetic change based on the quota principle?

The idea of rebuilding the PLO implies that there is a structure to rebuild. Or is there no real structure left? Do we need to start again

from nothing? In other words, are we starting from the foundations on which the PLO was built? Or has the PLO gone so far off course that new foundations are needed? It is also important to remember that the PLO's founding moments were subject to specific conditions that no longer exist.

What is needed now is fundamental reform, a transformation of the old system into a new one. When comparing the old and the new, three important issues need to be taken into consideration:

- Firstly, the PLO's prompt and hasty response to the Israeli demand that the PLO Charter be abolished and replaced by a new one, and the substitution of the PLO's national, historical, Arab and international legitimacy by the Palestinian Legislative Council and its executive authority. In other words, whether through integration or change, the PLO's authentic authority was supplanted by a secondary authority; what existed was abolished.
- Secondly, the slow response of the people in power after their loss in the 2006 elections. Fatah again resorted to unilateralism and politics, and began talking about reactivating the PLO to serve its own narrow political interests. This renders the progress made under the 2005 Cairo Declaration rather useless; that is, it is directed at maintaining what exists, instead of moving towards what should be.
- Thirdly, the stance of the Islamist movements towards the PLO, and the state of confusion within the PLO itself (in terms of its leadership, structures, programmes, and identity) led Palestinians to acknowledge, for the first time, the illegitimacy of the PLO as a representative body. This is especially true in relation to the PLO's representation through democratic means. This then takes us back to the present duality between authority and power. An organisation in this state must reconsider all its components, focusing on how things should be, and not on how they are.

Therefore, let's consider what would be the best way of dealing with the issues of developing, reactivating, and reforming the PLO in the face of existing crises and emerging problems.

The 2005 Cairo Declaration settled issues between the Palestinian factions: that is, the PLO is still seen as representing the unity of the Palestinian people and their legitimate aspirations. However, two incorrect assumptions were made in Cairo. The first was that, as a product of the stage of national liberation, the PLO had fulfilled its

historical duties. The second was that it was possible to form an alternative to the PLO. The problem with this is that despite all the stagnation it suffers from, the PLO still enjoys legitimacy in the Arab and international arenas. We therefore, have two alternatives: (i) to leave the entire matter in the hands of fate to sort things out, thus paving the way for unilateralism to entrench itself, and further renouncing hope of legitimate representation; or (ii) and this is the option that we strongly advocate: to deal with the PLO as an entity that represents the entire Palestinian people.

What this means is that the organisation becomes a channel for the meanings and content of the political unity of the Palestinians. As a result, the organisation and its content become a battlefield for the struggles of the political forces, without this struggle encroaching on the borders of the legal entity and institutional framework. Overall, the conflicts within the organisation on how to rebuild it, and the national conversations related to putting our house in order, are sound. There is no need for us to withdraw from such confrontation, or to restrict ourselves to abstract debate. The point of departure is that no single person or organisation owns the PLO. The Palestinian people own the PLO.

The weakness and ageing that has afflicted the institutions of the PLO have negatively affected the status and capability of its institutions to fulfil their leadership and representational role. This necessitates prompt moves to reactivate and develop the institution by rebuilding it based on national and democratic programmes. This should take place through elections, based on its Charter, and relative representation in areas where elections are difficult to hold. This will surely fortify and empower the role of the organisation, and its status as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people wherever they exist.

The will to engage in dialogue

Prospects for a comprehensive national dialogue start from national principles, regulators, and determinants. Above all, such a solution will have to be based on our will to engage in dialogue, not just our ability to manage a dialogue with the intention of facing internal as well as external threats. For the sake of practicality, a couple of preliminaries have to be established.

First, it must be acknowledged that the entire national Palestinian movement, with its national, Islamist and leftist constituents, are all

in a quagmire at present. With them in the quagmire are the political parameters and forces needed to raise the level of unity among the Palestinian people. The Zionist strategy has so far focused on driving a wedge into Palestinian unity domestically and in the diaspora, by dividing us and our rights. The prerequisite to unifying the Palestinian people, and creating a national response, is to pool our means of struggle and to unite behind our sole legitimate representative, the PLO.

Second, as long as the PLO leads the Palestinian struggle, whether at home or abroad, its power lies in rebuilding and reactivating itself, based on democratic, pluralistic, unifying and collective principles. This should be coupled with a spirit of political partnership, and a true representation of the forces, alliances, and the powers of our Palestinian people.

The relationship between the PA and the PLO

The PLO is the supreme political grouping, and must therefore remain the national reference point for the Palestinian Authority. The institutions of the Authority must be represented in the PLO. We must declare all past and future attempts to substitute the PLO with the Palestinian Authority as erroneous. Everyone must understand that we are engaged in a period of national liberation, and that we are subject to its conditions. This means that we cannot discuss the concept of a state while it is still being born. If we assume that we are in a phase of half revolution and half statehood, this must be reflected in our concept of power, through a government based on common ground, with the PLO at the base of national agreement. There are differences between us, but Israeli occupation and our responsibilities push us to define both our common ground and our higher interests. The Palestinian cause, our rights, our land, and Jerusalem all lie in the balance.

In order to achieve the necessary level of national agreement, we recommend:

- Speeding up the project to revive and activate the PLO, through a conference to be chaired by the head of the executive committee, and with the participation of the prime minister, the bureaus of the Palestinian National Council, the Palestinian Legislative Council, and the general secretaries or their representatives.
- Freezing any transfers, appointments, or promotions that are not dictated by necessity in the PLO, including in its departments and consulates, during this transitional period.

- Devising a programme of common ground, a plan, mechanisms, and deadlines that end with concluding the coming session of the new Palestinian National Council. The PLO's Central Council should call for a meeting of all the individuals elected to leadership or representational positions in the last Palestinian National Council elections, and since the establishment of the Palestinian Authority. The objective of the meeting must be to ensure that a new session of the Palestinian National Council will be held no later than the end of 2006.
- Creating a united leadership structure that works as an internal Palestinian reference, and has a mandate to make local decisions without affecting or denying the authority or the power and role of the leading and national representational associations or institutions. A united leadership is a necessity because some Palestinian forces fall outside the representational and leadership scope of the PLO. The need for such a leadership increased after the 2006 parliamentary elections. This should be an interim leadership until the new Palestinian National Council is created, as part of which a new executive committee of the PLO will be created.

In order to formalise these recommendations, we suggest that a united leadership structure should include: (i) the head of the PLO executive committee and the head of the Palestinian Authority (ii) the heads of the Palestinian National Council and the Palestinian Legislative Council, and the prime minister; (iii) the secretary generals of the different factions, or their representatives, along with three independent national figures.

The mission of this interim leadership structure would be to ensure the participation of all Palestinian forces in decision making, and to follow up on the execution of such decisions as follows:

- Decisions that have a national or a collective political nature, particularly when it comes to representational delegations to other regional and international organisations, institutions, or associations, should be followed up by the executive committee.
- Decisions that affect national or domestic affairs fall within the scope of the Palestinian Authority, so the Authority should follow up on these, using its own departments and institutions, and in ways that do not contradict the Charter or its own bylaws.

Our engagement with this issue is no longer optional; it is a political and practical necessity. Success in confronting the occupation and its

continuous incursions through new plans and strategies cannot be effective in times of internal conflict, unilateralism, and exclusion. Rather, it is through our ability to unite the potentials of the Palestinian people that we will achieve maximum benefit and potency.

Is there any task that supersedes the unity of the Palestinian people, given the existential dangers we face? And where do our national interests lie at every turn of the conflict? Our national interests come before the interests of any faction. Unity increases on the battleground; disagreement is minimised through dialogue. The path to liberty and freedom is through a firm, unifying, effective, national institution and resistance.

CHAPTER 15

Rebuilding the PLO: The perspective of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad

Anwar Abu Taha

In this chapter, I discuss the stance of the Islamic Jihad movement towards the PLO, and towards engaging with its framework and its institutions. I will try to cover how we understand and deal with this issue.

Islamist stances on entering the PLO

The call for Islamist movements to enter the PLO, and for the PLO to remain a unifying structure for all our people and our political and resistance efforts, is not new. In response to this call, the stance of Palestinian Islamists has swung between three poles.

The first is an absolute rejection, and a dubbing of the PLO as being in a state of jahiliyya (pre-Islamic disbelief, or ignorance) and infidelity, like those Arab regimes that do not base their rule on Islamic principles. This position is mainly adopted by Islamist forces and groupings outside the PLO. Indeed, these groups are generally not charted on the resistance or ‘jihadi’ map of the Palestinian people.

The second is a provisional rejection, which leaves the door open to accepting conditions related to the identity of the PLO, its political programme and its role in the struggle, on the one hand, and related to the quota earmarked for the Islamist factions, on the other. This is the position of Hamas, which joined the first intifada after early discussions with the PLO to discuss the issue of entry. Those discussions failed to reach any conclusions with regard to programmes or quotas.

The third is also a provisional rejection, which also leaves the door open to accepting conditions related to the identity of the PLO, its political programme and its role in the struggle, but which differs from

the second pole in that it pays no attention to the issue of quota or percentages of representation, believing that these should not form decisive criteria in the decision. This is the stance of Islamic Jihad.

It is important to note here that, historically, the focus has been on the PLO's ideological position. The view that Islamists cannot participate in the PLO led to an absence of Islamists from Palestinian national resistance and jihad from the start of the contemporary Palestinian revolution. Being able to stigmatise the PLO as 'secular' and 'anti-Islamic' was a relief to Islamist consciences that were originally absent from the battleground, and which used this to excuse their absence. This changed after the emergence of Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad during the first intifada, and both movements have since played outstanding roles in the battle or jihad, including in the second intifada.

Emphasising the role of Islam in the Palestinian struggle cannot be realised by simply demanding that the PLO state in its documents and literature that the martyrs of Hamas and Islamic Jihad helped to write our history with their blood on the battlegrounds. In other words, Islamists are no longer demanding that the PLO pay lip service to the role and stature of Islam, but that they give due reverence to 'suicide fighters' who lived out their beliefs in the Battle of Jenin in 2002 and in Rafah – as marked by the sacrifices of Hamas leaders Yahiya Ayyash and Mahmoud Tawalbe.

The need to unify national structures

For Islamist forces, the starting point in determining whether to join the PLO lies in the following question: is there a need, either Islamic or national, for such a step in the present circumstances? Or, is there a need to rebuild the PLO so that it is able to include all the popular forces, including Hamas and Islamic Jihad, and in a way that serves an Islamic orientation in the end?

The answer is certainly yes.

At this particular time, in 2006, when the international, regional and local circumstances are different from any previously encountered by the Palestinian cause, the struggle is in dire need of a unifying framework. The question is, should the PLO necessarily serve as this unifying structure? The catastrophic consequences of the PLO's many failures on many levels have accumulated over the years, and make it difficult in terms of a national – let alone Islamist – consciousness to accept that the PLO can fulfil this role. However, our emotional response

towards the experience of the PLO, its history and reality, should not prevent us from acknowledging the following objective truths, which make the PLO the only real structure available:

- The PLO enjoys widespread recognition in the Arab, Islamic, and international arenas, and it is unlikely, under current circumstances, that this would be given to any alternative or new organisation or coalition.
- Unlike the Palestinian Authority, which came into being as a result of an agreement with the occupier, the PLO is a product of Palestinian and Arab initiatives. As such, it is not the outcome of an emergency or a passing crisis; and regardless of any ideological or political preservation, it stems from the necessity for Palestinians to struggle for their rights, and to build a national political entity. Since the Oslo Accords, the unifying framework offered by the PLO has been systematically marginalised and sidelined. In essence, the PLO is being turned into an archaic and paralysed sidekick to the Palestinian Authority. To revive the PLO, and then to rebuild and shape it, making it fit to accommodate all the forces inside and outside Palestine, is to save and protect it. It is important to acknowledge that there are some forces that would prefer to get rid of the structure, or to keep it as a useless piece of decoration – a talisman for the protection of the Palestinian cause. But the Palestinian Authority cannot represent the people scattered throughout the lands occupied in 1948, nor those whose lands were occupied in 1967, nor the more than five million Palestinians who are living in exile.
- With the presence and clout that Islamist forces (Hamas and Islamic Jihad) wield on the streets of Palestine, their admittance into the PLO, with all its legitimacy, and all the new impetus it needs to develop, does not necessarily mean that these forces will join the PLO's existing programme. The point of our entry is to make the resistance programme that has been adopted by the Islamist movements into a unifying national programme. In other words, resistance should become the declared will of Palestinian people; it should not be an isolated alternative that can be struck out and eliminated as a precondition to the implementation of America's 'road map', or as one of the consequences of the so-called war on terror. Our entry into the PLO is not an expression of submission to reality, or a response to the need for political realism that has been marketed since signing of the Oslo Accords. It is simply an expression of what is necessary for the sake of enhancing national resistance.

Requirements for rebuilding the PLO

Based on what I have said already, if we agree on the need to rebuild the PLO, and to admit the Islamist forces into it, the important questions then remain: which PLO are we talking about, and what PLO do we want?

To answer these questions, I would like to affirm that we fully understand the connotations of our entry into the PLO. We are not ready to compromise any of the principles that determine our stance towards the PLO. As such, we have no illusions about the possibility of rebuilding the PLO. It can easily be turned into a unifying structure that combines all the forces of the Palestinian people, with Hamas and Islamic Jihad taking the lead. The 2005 Cairo Declaration affirmed the creation of a committee to discuss the process of developing and rebuilding the PLO according to new foundations to be agreed upon by all forces. Based on this, our organisation attended the preliminary meeting held in Gaza for this purpose. The expectation from that meeting was that it would be followed by others that would be attended by the secretary generals of the different factions, with the purpose of discussing the foundations for the proposed reconstruction of the PLO.

Thus, joining the PLO is not a simple mechanical procedure that can be achieved by merely completing a pile of paperwork; it is a long and complicated process. We are still in the very early phase of discussions. Like others, we realise that there are some prerequisites that must be in place before we can say that we are part of the PLO. This brings us closer to the question of which PLO we are talking about.

In some ways, the answer to this question should be self-evident; the PLO should truly live up to its name, it should be the Palestinian Liberation Organization. It should be a jihadi tool designed for the purpose of liberating Palestine, as well as a unifying structure that never operates outside of the resistance project. On the contrary, the PLO should be the true representative of resistance.

Our membership of the PLO will not mean that we are willing to compromise on our principles. Instead, it will be an act that aims to restore the unity of our people and our lands, both of which have been dealt a blow by the Oslo Accords, and by the looming negotiated settlement. From our perspective, the most important points related to rebuilding the PLO are:

- *The Charter*: some forces in the PLO are talking about returning to the National Charter. They demand that we repeal the recanting of some of its articles during the 1998 ceremony attended by

Bill Clinton. This was something that Arafat never endorsed. In our opinion, even if the old charter were reinstated, there would still be a need for a new charter that takes into consideration the Islamic dimension of the Palestinian cause, and which reflects the current reality in the Palestinian arena. It is not easy to reach this objective given the current positions of the Palestinian Authority (at least its official one under the Oslo Accords), Fatah, and several other factions. Since the creation of the Palestinian Authority, talk has revolved around drafting a Palestinian constitution, which sees the Palestinian entity as a transitional authority, and not as an 'organisation' leading a particular phase of the national liberation struggle.

- *Previous national decisions:* regardless of levels of commitment shown by the official leaderships within the different factions, such decisions are ultimately the sum of the political will at any particular moment in time. There is no logic in continuing to impose such decisions as draconian diktats upon the Palestinian people. Accordingly, in our opinion, along with all the compromises they implied, these decisions belong to a bygone political era. They are not part of any sacred trust, and therefore they can be changed or overturned.
- *The political programme:* the PLO has no clear political programme at this time. Its programme can be summed up in the word 'settlement', and as carried out by the Palestinian Authority. The rebuilding of the PLO means that its political programme must reflect the views of all who belong to the organisation. Thus, the entrance of Hamas and Islamic Jihad into the PLO means that the current political programme will have to change so that the organisation becomes more reflective of the will of all the Palestinian people.
- *The relationship between the Palestinian Authority and the PLO:* one of the prerequisites of rebuilding is to create a complete separation between the PLO and the Palestinian Authority. This is not only relevant to positions in office, but has to do with all sorts of interventions. The Palestinian Authority has certain inalienable functions, which must be carried out under the supervision of the PLO; the PLO should not be an arm of the Palestinian Authority. The Palestinian Authority has no authority to impose its programmes on the PLO, or to use the PLO to carry out its work.
- *Mechanisms for restructuring:* in light of the discussions about separating the Palestinian Authority and the PLO from each other,

participation in the Palestinian Legislative Council could be a means through which the Authority could take part in the Palestinian National Council, as has been proposed. However, this mechanism has a number of drawbacks. Firstly, the role of any structure (that is not a PLO member) in electing the Palestinian Legislative Council would have to be clarified. Simply being given automatic membership of the National Council, without agreeing to the other requirements for joining the PLO, would mean ignoring the need for fundamental changes related to the PLO's identity, political programme, and the role of resistance in the organisation. This was made clear in Hamas's stance towards, and its participation in, the National Council elections. Secondly, there are major forces on the ground, including Islamic Jihad, that have a role in resistance, and which, in the current circumstances, do not participate in elections for the Legislative Council. Other popular and democratic forces participated, but given the fierce competition between Fatah and Hamas, their representation is weak. How can we enhance the participation of such forces in the Palestinian National Council, unless the road to addressing the issue goes through the Palestinian Legislative Council? Thirdly, the National Council contains 132 members from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. What about the Palestinian people in exile? Can we hold elections abroad?

In general, we must work out how to reform the National Council and the rest of the institutions in the PLO. What mechanisms are needed to unite all the forces, including Hamas and Islamic Jihad?

Based on the above, and in light of the PLO's legacy, one matter that has been a source of complaints from forces that make up the PLO is that the process of rebuilding – with all its components and demands, and all the different complications that influence the Palestinian situation on all levels – is not an easy one. Rebuilding will not be achieved through wishful thinking; it is a complex and painstaking process that will require sincere efforts and continuous work from all parties if we are to see a rebirth of the PLO. In order to achieve this, all the forces – including Islamic Jihad – will have to face up to the challenges and demands posed by this decisive moment, and respond to the calls for resistance that our movement has answered. Such demands cannot be ignored, dismissed, or left to wait on the 'shores of our dreams'.

Naturally, dialogue between all the forces should be the starting point for realising all these dreams, and the key to reaching our objective.

Serious and responsible dialogue relies, first and foremost, on the good intentions of all participants. The presence of such intentions, along with clearly mapping our priorities in such a way that we help to get this great journey under way, means that there is readiness on all sides. It also means that the possibility exists for moving towards a new phase of internal Palestinian relations, in which national unity is not just an empty slogan, but becomes institutionalised. A unifying structure, that acts as a truly legitimate representative of the Palestinian forces, and provides all the elements of strength and continuity we require in the struggle and jihad of our people, has the potential to ensure that we completely restore our claim to our land.

CHAPTER 16

Rebuilding the PLO: The perspective of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine

Suhail al-Natour

Although the official establishment of the PLO dates back to 1964, the transformation that began with the initiation of the armed struggle on 1 January 1965, as well as the cumulative efforts of other national resistance factions (especially Fatah), led to their admittance into the PLO, and, later their rise into the leadership. Through this process, the PLO was transformed from being a nominal organisation, established through Arab fiat and under Arab sponsorship, into a popular organisation that represented the Palestinian entity.

What was new here was that the membership of the Palestinian National Council was reformulated in a manner that ensured the representation of all factions, efficacies, and personalities, including representatives of refugee camps and various professional associations. The structure gained independence through electing an executive committee from among the main factions, and including some independent candidates and experts. The PLO developed rapidly after 1968, and acquired broad recognition from Arab leaders at the Algeria Summit of 1972. This recognition was deepened at the Morocco Summit of 1974 where the right of the Palestinian people to establish an independent national authority on liberated soil was acknowledged, and the PLO was recognised as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. However, the PLO then froze. No significant developments took place until 1993, when the Oslo Accords were signed.

In the intervening years, political alliances shifted constantly, with various forces joining and leaving the PLO, but without affecting the legitimacy of the PLO or the National Council. The reality of stagnation became sharper and clearer after 1982, when the PLO was expelled from Beirut. This expulsion triggered an internal crisis for the PLO.

Until then, the movement's relatively cushy status in Lebanon had led the PLO to postpone addressing the complex and unresolved questions relating to the Palestinian condition and the national movement within the Occupied Territory. The same crisis manifested again in 1983 and 1984, through the rise of a set of dissenting structures: the Palestinian National Alliance, and then the Palestinian National Salvation Front, were set up in opposition to the Amman Summit of 1985, and to the fact that the Palestinian National Council had been convened in the capital of Jordan.

In 1987 two important developments took place. The first, in April, was the convening of a meeting of the Palestinian National Council, which helped to unify the various factions and forces. The meeting was a kind of prelude to the first intifada that began in December of that year. The key change that this brought about was the approval of the Aden/Algeria Programme for reforming the structure of the PLO. The programme was based on consecrating the principle of collective leadership, and the creation of institutions within the framework of the PLO to spread democratic practices. However, despite the fact that it pointed to the objective need for organisational development, and the programme was approved in theory, the programme was never implemented in any practical way.

The second important development in 1987 was that Hamas declared that it was going to work towards the creation of a framework for the inclusion of Islamist values in Palestinian politics. This marked the rise of Palestinian forces with popular influence outside the PLO, that is, forces that do not acknowledge the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. It is true that, in the beginning, Hamas's influence in Palestinian decision-making was relatively minimal. However, before the signing of the Oslo Accords, and during the Madrid negotiations, real Palestinian opposition to the PLO began to grow. Hamas and the Islamic Jihad formed part of this opposition, along with other factions outside the PLO. This period also marked the point at which Hamas began to play a role in resistance. It began with the expulsion of its leadership from the Occupied Territory to Marj al-Zuhur in 1991. This made the movement a regional and international player in the Palestinian cause. Despite being outside of the PLO, Hamas then started to influence political decisions, and after the Gaza-Jericho agreement, the new authority had to deal with Hamas, which already wielded influence at home.

This situation led to a division within the Palestinian national movement. The creation of the Palestinian Authority started gradually

in Gaza and Jericho, before spreading to the West Bank. The Palestinian Authority was not collectively acknowledged by Palestinians, despite being the legitimate offspring of the PLO, and despite the Palestinian National Council declaring that the Palestinian Authority was acting in the name of the PLO with regard to Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Parties opposed to the Oslo Accords, including some factions within the PLO, refused to accept this declaration.

In addition, the Islamist movements started to crystallise into two major organisations – Hamas and Islamic Jihad. With the gradual implementation of the Oslo Accords, the Palestinian political system took an important and a qualitative leap in 1994 with the formation of the Palestinian Authority. The decision to establish the Palestinian Legislative Council included the election of a president of the Palestinian Authority, and the appointment of the first Palestinian cabinet. This leap, however, was not met with unanimous approval. Many Palestinian factions, including Hamas and Islamic Jihad, positioned themselves outside this development, especially with regard to representation in the PLO.

It is common knowledge that these developments were the fruit of negotiations with Israel. At first, the developments were described as temporary. Then, some efforts were made to transform the Palestinian Authority into an alternative to the PLO. This involved trying to extend the political system created under the Palestinian Authority to all Palestinian areas, and replacing the comprehensive political system advocated by the PLO. These efforts captured little ground, and, for many reasons, they gradually collapsed. For one, the Oslo Accords reached a deadlock. The time for their interim phase has elapsed, and it became clear that the Accords would not lead to a permanent peace.

Then the process of creating a political system took a new turn, evidenced in the Palestinian national dialogue that took place from 1998 to 2000. This dialogue led to a reactivation of the forces within the PLO, based on it being the supreme reference for the Palestinian cause, and on the commitment of the PLO to Palestinian principles. The outcome of the dialogue was an agreement on the necessity to end the interim phase, and to reach a permanent solution that would ensure the creation of an independent Palestinian state within the borders of the lands occupied in 1967. This resulted in a revival (albeit partial) of the PLO and its institutions, after a period of stagnation that had lasted from 1974 to 1999.

This revival was strengthened by the second intifada, which emphasises to the need to include all parties including Islamist ones

in Palestinian political decision making. It was in this context that the notion of creating a unified national leadership was suggested, and gathered broad popular support. Agreement on the necessity of reforming the Palestinian political system was reached. The PLO was to be reformed through democratic means, and the Palestinian Authority was to be reformed via elections.

After the 2006 elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council, another deadlock occurred. This created the need for a national salvation plan that focused not only on activating and developing the PLO's institutions, but also on defining the different aspects of the longed for Palestinian political system. The key to resolving the current crisis lies in finding a formula for a comprehensive political partnership within both the Palestinian Authority and the PLO. Such a formula will have to uphold national principles, and be based on a realist appraisal of the regional and international situation, as well as the need to succeed in influencing, rather than merely opposing, these.

Consequently, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine recommends:

- Finding political common ground, which can help break the US–Israeli siege, and prevent Israel from obtaining international support for its unilateral expansionist plans.
- Formulating a plan that combines resistance with political action; that is, a plan that guarantees the effective co-ordination of both political action and resistance. This must include embarking on negotiations, yet retaining the option of resistance.
- Strengthening popular activism and resistance against the occupier while launching an international political campaign to break the siege.
- Reaching agreement on the PLO taking charge of any negotiations with the Israelis, within predefined parameters, and under the supervision of a higher committee.
- Creating a national coalition government, in which all dominant forces are represented under a shared programme based on: underscoring the position of the PLO; a commitment to the Declaration of Independence as the basic charter; adopting a political programme; initiating an economic recovery plan; and enhancing the safety and security of Palestinians, including entrenching the rights of women.
- Activating and developing the PLO's institutions by adopting the Cairo Declaration, and formulating a binding plan of action that ensures: (i) a meeting of the head and the members of PLO's executive committee, the head of the Palestinian National Council, the general

secretaries of all the Palestinian factions, as well as popular national figures, with the objective of agreeing upon a reactivation and development process, as well as a schedule for implementation; (ii) reaching a temporary arrangement that ensures the participation of all national forces, (including Hamas and Islamic Jihad) in the leadership of the PLO (and especially in the executive committee and the Central Council), in a way that guarantees unity at the centre of the Palestinian leadership's decision making until elections can be held and a new Palestinian National Council can be established; (iii) creating a new Palestinian National Council, through democratic elections based on proportional representation, and reaching national consensus on the methods of representation in areas of refuge and exile where elections are difficult to hold; (iv) developing the scope and performance of the PLO's Department of Refugee Affairs, and ensuring the participation of all parties in its creation and in the crafting of its policies, with the objective of unifying efforts in relation to protecting the political and civil rights of refugees, improving their living conditions, and co-ordinating their struggle; v) creating a national reference committee for the city of Jerusalem, with the participation of all forces, political, social and religious, in order to resolve all aspects related to the issue of the holy city; vi) reactivating all PLO structures, and reviving the National Fund, separating this from the treasury of the Palestinian Authority; and vii) working towards uniting professional associations and unions, based on democratic principles, and holding elections based on proportional representation.

Part VI Debate

*Moderated by Walid Muhammad Ali
Director, Baheth Center for Strategic and
Palestinian Studies, Beirut*

Jawad al-Hamad, *director of the Middle East Studies Center in Jordan, and an expert in Palestinian studies*

I have three ideas to put forward. First, the other factions are still not willing to believe the changes that have taken place in the Islamist movement, which has moved from absolute rejection to a readiness to enter into, and participate in, dialogue. The position taken by the Palestinian government is inappropriate, and the last thing that the Palestinian government needs is domestic pressure. I call upon everyone to understand and acknowledge the transformation that the Islamists have undergone. We should no longer continue with this negative mentality.

Second, as for my brothers in Islamic Jihad, setting prerequisites to entering the PLO is problematic, even if it is legitimate. I suggest facilitating some conditions so that such prerequisites do not prevent dialogue. However, if there is an acceptance of the need to restructure the PLO, this must include the potential for democracy. So is there really a need for prerequisites?

Third, with regard to the PLO and the Palestinian Authority, I hope there will be no obstacles on the path to resolving this issue, and that there will be no intransigence over terms, names or titles. The participation of Hamas and Islamic Jihad in the executive committee is welcomed, as is the idea that the executive committee should function as a caretaker committee until the restructuring of the PLO is completed.

Salah Salah, *member of the Palestinian National Council and former leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine*

I have some points to make that I hope will be useful. First, I would like to point out that several attempts at rectification have been made from inside and outside of the PLO. I have a conviction that attempts at

reform from outside, such as the efforts of the Salvation Front and the Rejectionist Front, have not succeeded. I call on the PLO to focus on rectification from within, while noting that the first attempt to provide an alternative proposition was within the frame of Salvation Front, which claimed to be the true representative of the PLO at the national conference in Damascus, which took place shortly after the repeal of the Charter. We will face dilemmas no matter what steps we take – be they rebuilding, restructuring, or creating a new organisation from within the womb of the PLO. We will clash with Fatah, which has reached a high level of assimilation with the PLO. On the other hand, there is Hamas. The main hotspots for the clash are likely to be about divisions, spheres of influence, and unilateralism. Can Hamas overcome such a situation? Can Fatah accept the need to step aside and make way for a solution?

Second, I would like to make a point about political programmes. We need to discuss and agree on a political programme, but who will write such programmes? Serious breakthroughs led to the implementation of Fatah's programmes. Is Hamas ready for a serious dialogue and consent? Can it set a good example for Fatah? Only then will we be able to reach consent and fully commit ourselves to whatever we agree on.

Third, with regard to democracy within the PLO: we used to agree on certain decisions and then find out later that different decisions had been carried out. At that point, the quota system of representation was implemented. Can we find and implement a democratic formula that everyone can commit themselves to?

Last, with regard to the point on who should be in charge of PLO funds: all active forces and partners should benefit from such funds. However, in the past, funds had been allocated exclusively to one faction (Fatah), and others had been excluded. Is Hamas ready to provide a new model?

Hisham Debsy, *Fatah member and media advisor for the PLO embassy in Lebanon*

When talking about the weakening of the PLO, I would like to salute comrade Marwan Abdul Al for the critical way in which he started the discussion. All the participants could be more direct and daring so that we can reach a conclusion on whether to rebuild the PLO or not. If we want a quick and brief review, we have to re-examine the Arab–Palestinian axis and its role in splitting and weakening the PLO. For example, look at what happened in Jordan in 1970 and 1971, when the

legitimacy of the PLO was threatened by force.¹ At that point, we were trying to reach a quorum in order to maintain legitimacy.

Most of our discussions have focused on unilateralism and monopoly, but where are the other political parties? I was hoping to see other political forces (such as the democratic left, for example) creating a successful alliance to contest the elections, but this never happened.

Nevertheless, let's see how the Islamist forces – Hamas and Islamic Jihad – have weakened the PLO through their political mantras about 'thwarting the settlement process' and 'shooting down the Oslo Accords and other negotiations'. I am afraid that rebuilding the PLO might turn into something like what happened to the Palestinian Authority after Oslo and before the 2006 elections. The problem is that we oppose a power until we take it over, and then we change the discourse. Are we going to oppose the PLO until we take over, and then mould it into the form we desire?

Nafez Abu Hasna, *journalist and author*

The Salvation Front did not propose the issue of an alternative organisation. Marwan Abdul Al started off by talking about something highly important, and I expected him to follow up in an exceptional way. He could have made a serious contribution on the question of political monopoly. But the real question is this: you all had representatives in the executive committee; to what degree did your representatives support the programmes they came up with? Let's review the experience with some realism. It is very easy to blame the bigger forces. The acceptance of organisations as members of the PLO has always been discussed in the PLO; it is part of our political process. There is no problem with Hamas and Islamic Jihad subscribing to a certain vision and then being admitted into the PLO. However, I believe that our experience needs to be revisited in relation to the level of division that was caused by particular political tendencies. We can say that the PLO represents the Palestinian people, but if the PLO's political performance becomes contradictory, popular opposition naturally follows. The problem lies in the PLO's political programme. I repeat my recommendation that we should move towards a national preparatory commission.

Ghabi Jamal, *journalist and activist*

What is striking is that neither the Salvation Front nor the Arab regimes succeeded in destroying the PLO; it was undermined from within. There is a great responsibility borne by the Palestinian left, which should have become the third power, and put forth alternatives and solutions. I don't know why all its initiatives have been frozen? The left, which previously relied on Fatah, is now leaning on Hamas to further its interests. With regard to the contribution of Islamic Jihad, it seems to be trying to exclude itself, and to refuse calls to enter the PLO.

Ali Barakah, *Hamas's representative in Lebanon*

I would like to clarify a point that was mentioned in the contribution made by Islamic Jihad on Hamas's position towards the PLO. After the 2005 Cairo dialogue, Islamic Jihad settled on a position and was not calling for an alternative organisation. It now calls for rebuilding the PLO. As for the issue of quotas, Hamas did not advocate quotas. In 1989 and 1990, Hamas proposed elections. When Fatah tried to corner Hamas, it suggested forty per cent, but, in truth, Hamas does not want a quota.

Munir Shafiq, *co-ordinator of the Nationalist Islamic Congress, and leading ideologue for Arab nationalism, leftism and Islamism*

I want us to pause and consider the slogan that the PLO is the 'sole legitimate representative' of the Palestinian people. This slogan represented an Arab attitude towards Sadat, and aimed to push him out of the Arab summit. The aim was to let Sadat go to the settlement talks without having to worry about the Palestinians. There were two Palestinian perspectives, one positive and one negative. The Arabs and the Palestinians inside Palestine warned against the negative stance. There was a determination not to let either side settle the matter. After that phase elapsed, there was no more reason for fear or concern. The slogan, however, acquired a new dimension, related to the centrality of the state. When we say that Palestine is an Arab cause, where are the Arabs on this issue? Making Palestine a Palestinian issue will destroy the Palestinian cause and the unity of the Palestinian people; it will leave Palestinians inside to decide for themselves. The Palestinian issue has to go back to being an integrally Palestinian, Arab and Islamic issue. You cannot ask for Arab support then do whatever you wish, especially when you are about to embark upon major compromises that will affect the future of Arabs generally. The Israeli entity is not only a Palestinian concern; it is an

Arab one. Why didn't we think about pausing to look at the experience of the Arab League follow-up committee on the Arab Peace Initiative and its leadership during the resistance period? There was unity among the Palestinian factions. They worked positively together, even during battles. This experience needs to be studied. We have to derive lessons from it, should we seek national unity. As for Suhail al-Natour's use of the term 'Islamists', I do not like this term. It is misplaced. It exhibits some antagonism, and is contrary to the spirit of unification.

Tariq Akkawi, *Palestinian activist*

The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine are the most capable organisations when it comes to providing a vision of how to boost the PLO. These organisations need not wait for other factions in the Palestinian arena to come to them for discussions; they have their own role. Their role will be positive and significant if they take the initiative to provide programmes that will bring individuals into dialogue with one another.

Kamal Naji, *PLO representative in Lebanon and peacemaker*

It seems that activating the role of the Palestinian left is a necessity for Palestine. We call upon Fatah to review their position from the left. In relation Anwar Abu Taha's contribution, I have this comment: there has to be a complete separation and disengagement between the PLO and the Palestinian Authority. This should not only encompass offices and positions, but should include all types of overlap. In fact, I see a contradiction in Taha's paper. On the one hand, he calls for a complete separation, while on the other hand, he sees the Palestinian Authority as an offshoot of the PLO. I agree that the Palestinian Authority is imposing its power on the PLO. A detailed identification of the structural relationship between the two structures, and their missions, is necessary. Oversight mechanisms that will review the work of the Palestinian Authority in a manner that suits the charter that is to be adopted by the PLO also need to be identified.

Muhammad al-Bujairmi, *Palestinian activist*

Some talk about unilateralism as though they are not part of the PLO. If there has been a political downslide, all PLO member organisations are partially responsible for it. Haitham Abu al-Ghizlan pointed out that, in terms of historical accuracy, history cannot be said to have started

when the Islamists engaged in armed resistance through Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Islamists joined the PLO since Fatah was established, and people such as Abdullah Azam and Ahmad Said Nufal participated in the Palestinian revolution. From an Islamist perspective, there was no problem with them joining the sheikhs in Jordan.

The contribution made by Anwar Abu Taha of Islamic Jihad did not provide an answer regarding their attitude towards the PLO. It is incomprehensible that, as we try to reach a unifying national framework, anyone should try to impose their own ideology. Palestinian society is culturally and spiritually diverse. Our frameworks must be flexible enough to accommodate everyone.

Ahmad Said Nufal, *professor of political science, Yarmouk University, Jordan*

There are commonalities in the contributions of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, but, for years, disagreements between the two sides have surfaced, and these continue to exist. Some say that negotiations and meetings are taking place in an attempt to bridge the gap, but both factions refuse to enter a coalition aimed at bringing their different perspectives closer. Is it better for the sake of the Palestinian cause to leave any faction outside the PLO, especially if we agree that the PLO should function as an umbrella body? Would Hamas agree to leave any faction outside the PLO? The important issue now is resistance. We can no longer afford the intellectual luxury of these theoretical differences. Arab countries used to intervene for the sake of the Palestinian cause. This happens much less now, and it would serve the interests of Palestinians if it were to happen again.

Shafiq al-Hout, *journalist and author, founder member of the PLO who resigned from the executive after the signing of the Oslo Accords*

The Knesset is but fifty metres away from our people in Jerusalem. Israel has more parties than we Palestinians have – parties that come from different backgrounds, ethnicities and schools of thought. Based on my observations, they hate each other much more than we do. However, I ask you to give me one example of anything that has come out of the Knesset that was not for the benefit of Israel. They have had one victory after another. Tell me about one prime minister who did not accomplish something that surpassed the achievements of the one before him. Have we not learnt our lesson? We can disagree, but then

we must refer to a central authority. We talk about the PLO as if it were a well-defined and organised movement. There has been no such thing as an organised movement in the PLO for the past twenty years. The PLO is Fatah and other factions in a coalition.

Hamas now is part of this coalition, albeit unofficially. The matter requires that we forego lots of details. I am not criticising here, I am merely assessing where Hamas stands. I am no fan of endless discussions about unity. In fact, I am fed up with hearing about it for the past forty-two years. Our brothers in Islamic Jihad have proposed conditions. I tell them blessed is the person who knows his own age and worth. Why Islamic Jihad and Hamas, why not a single organisation? When we disagree, where should we seek resolution? We cannot even say why we should unite. I am ashamed to say that despite all the disasters that have befallen us, we are still not united. Have you forgotten who kicked us out of Jordan? Even Lebanon, the weakest of Arab countries, became our Vietnam. While in Lebanon, Yasser Arafat ruled with more influence than Abu Mazen now rules from Ramallah. Then they said that we were crazy, and should not meddle in Lebanese affairs. Fatah, in all your greatness, and now Hamas in all your greatness, note that even the smallest Palestinian in the arena that you left behind can play against you. You cannot play around with strategic decisions.

Our criticism of the PLO after the settlement is not only related to the Oslo Accords. Nothing from Oslo has been implemented. Neither Israel nor the USA wants a settlement. I do not know when our next conference is scheduled for, but things may soon change radically. I am afraid that a day will come when relations between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip will be completely severed, just as today there is a separation between the Palestinians inside and those in the diaspora.

Usamah Hamdan, *head of Hamas's International Relations Department*

It is unfortunate that some see our political positions as though they were religious edicts, either permissible or prohibited. We express our political attitudes as political attitudes. We have never said that our participation in the PLO was either permissible or prohibited. We have said that we agree or disagree from a political position. What I want us to take from the point about our weakening the PLO is that if opposition to the settlement process has weakened the organisation, then let's drop it. It is not as if the PLO has only one programme. If it did, then it would be a truly weak organisation. But how inherently weak would the organisation

be if it put itself behind a programme that it considered strategic, even though it was unsuccessful. Added to this is the issue of mismanagement, whereby the leadership of the PLO sought to strengthen the Palestinian Authority while marginalising the PLO, and retaining a final say on all last-minute compromises. Members of the Palestinian Legislative Council were elected from within Fatah. I would like to assure everyone that I consider representation to be both relative and complete.

I have a few more points to make based on the points made in this debate:

I believe that, based on previous experiences, the recommendation for establishing an executive committee that includes Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and others, is not sensible. Let's engage with the heart of the matter, the rebuilding of the PLO: if the goal is to discuss pressing national issues, we have the precedent set by the Arab League's follow-up committee on the Arab Peace Initiative; we can repeat this example until the rebuilding is complete.

Anwar Abu Taha's starting point is erroneous. The idea that the Palestinian National Council should pass through the Palestinian Legislative Council is faulty. The Palestinian National Council will be directly elected by the people.

The National General Assembly of 1988 was not an alternative to the PLO. It created a committee to follow up on the issue of the National Charter based on us agreeing that the abolition of the Charter was disastrous.

I believe that we have discussed the issue of the 'sole and legitimate' representative for long enough. It is being used as a trump card to hinder any rebuilding.

Marwan Abdul Al, *member of the political bureau of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, artist and writer*

We need an institution that can accommodate our differences. We have the right to disagree. I do not believe that the gulf of difference between our two strategies is unbridgeable. Our problem is that we do not have an institution that we can resort to for arbitration. This is the power of Israel's Knesset. If Palestinians don't establish such an institution, of course we will disagree on the street, on television programmes, and in all other contexts. Therefore, we need an institution within which we can disagree with each other, while remaining under its umbrella. We will surely disagree, given our different support bases and our

backgrounds, but we have overriding and unifying political interests, and we should have indivisible principles and collective goals.

The other issue is that any problem can be resolved if there is a will to engage in dialogue. We need the bigger players to engage in dialogue at the Palestinian table before they make compromises at foreign ones. We know that the Palestinian reality does not exist in a vacuum. Of course, there are balances of power and Arab influences that affect us on many levels, but if we as Palestinians do not build our own house with our own hands, it is unimaginable that anyone else will be able to help us unless they do so with their own agendas. And in that case, we risk seeing our house demolished.

Haitham Abu al-Ghizlan, *member of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad*

First, I would like to point that, during the dialogue that took place in Cairo in March 2005, both Hamas and Islamic Jihad participated and actively joined in real political debate. What came out of the agreement can be called a gradual programme. I believe we can move forward from here. We can build on this experience, and advance with new, and more realistic expectations. This is better than immobilising the PLO and its leaders as we have done in the past. Instead, we can focus on the positive aspects of the Cairo meetings and move on from there. Abu Mazen did not call for a meeting of the committee comprised of secretary generals and independent personalities to discuss the rebuilding of the PLO. Therefore, I believe that some have unfairly judged us, and I implore you to put more effort into reading the reality so that you may arrive at a sound opinion.

Second, I would like to note that resistance did not begin with Hamas and Islamic Jihad. This is well known and has been referred to previously. Third, and Ali Barakah also referred to this, no injustice is being done to Hamas or anyone else. I would like us all to remember the well-known joke that when three Palestinians meet they establish three organisations! I hope we won't emerge from here having chosen to create any more organisations.

Suhail al-Natour, *member of the Central Committee of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine*

First, I would like to point out that different paths run between the notions of rebuilding and activating the PLO, some of which are contradictory and some of which overlap. But in the Palestinian arena

it is quite normal for issues to converge and mix in this way. Thus, we can start with activation and reach rebuilding, or vice versa. Two clear positions from two major movements call for activation. Other factions call for rebuilding. When I discussed this matter earlier, I did not want to focus on it too much, because the solution is not entirely in our hands at this point. I just wanted to highlight that the problem is still present and needs to be addressed.

Second, neither a leftist nor a non-leftist can escape their responsibilities in relation to the PLO. It is unjust to allocate all the responsibility to those who are PLO members. Some leftists kept going in and out of the PLO, while others stayed inside to work. The outcome is what we have today. This does not mean running away from responsibility; we all have to assume our responsibilities so that we create unity, and get moving with rebuilding and activation.

Endnotes

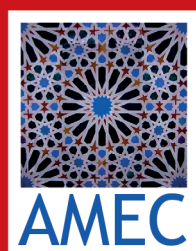
- 1 Editor's note: this seems to refer to Black September, and the conflict between Palestinians and Jordanians in Jordan.



At the turn of the millennium, after decades of struggle, the Palestinian Liberation Organization was in a shambles. In 2005, a reconciliation conference held in Cairo seemed to offer some hope for the revitalisation of the organisation, but Hamas's victory in the 2006 Palestinian Authority elections caught the PLO off-guard. Conflicts and tensions exploded as the PLO tried to claw back the power it had lost. Amid calls for the organisation to renew itself or make way for a new group, the al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies and Consultations convened a conference in Beirut to discuss the PLO. Representatives of the PLO's main factions joined leaders from Hamas, Islamic Jihad, as well as activists and academics, to discuss what they could learn from the past, and try to forge some consensus on how to take the Palestinian struggle forward.

This volume documents the papers and debates presented at the conference. Originally published in Arabic, the book provides a fascinating window on Palestinians' unique understandings of the history of their struggle, and of the PLO. It offers an insider's view on issues such as national unity, the intricate nature of relations between Palestinians in the diaspora and those in the Occupied Territory, the fragmented nature of the Arab condition, as well as the impact of the meddling by Arab nations and western powers in Palestinian affairs.

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